

# **The Decadent Reader**



*Zone Readers are edited by  
Michel Feher and Ramona Naddaff*

# The

FICTION, FANTASY, AND PERVERSION

# Decadent

FROM FIN-DE-SIECLE FRANCE

# Reader

EDITED BY ASTI HUSTVEDT

ZONE BOOKS NEW YORK 1998

840.8  
D2905

The publisher would like to thank the French Ministry of Culture for its assistance with this translation.

© 1998 Urzone, Inc.  
611 Broadway, Suite 608  
New York, NY 10012

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic, mechanical, photocopying, microfilming, recording, or otherwise (except for that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press) without written permission from the Publisher.

*Les Diaboliques* © 1933 and renewed by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher

*Saint Lydwine of Schiedam* was originally published in 1923 by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., London. Reprinted by Tan Books and Publishers in 1979.

Janet Beizer's introduction to *Monsieur Vénus* also appeared in *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* © 1994 Cornell University Press.

*Monsieur Vénus* originally published by Covici, Friede, New York, 1929. This edition published by permission of Flammarion © 1977.

*Tomorrow's Eve* © 1982 by the Board of Trustees of University of Illinois.

Phillipe Lejeune's introduction to the Guy de Maupassant selections was originally published in *Maupassant miroir de la nouvelle* © 1988 Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.

"The Divorce Case" originally published in *Collected Novels and Stories of Guy de Maupassant* © 1925 and renewed 1953 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

"A Woman's Hair" originally published in *Collected Novels and Stories of Guy de Maupassant* © 1923 and renewed 1951 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

"An Apparition" originally published in *Collected Novels and Stories of Guy de Maupassant* © 1923, 1924 and renewed 1951, 1952 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

"The Unknown" originally published in *Collected Novels and Stories of Guy de Maupassant* © 1923, 1924 and renewed 1951, 1952 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America.

Distributed by the MIT Press,  
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and  
London, England

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

The decadent reader /  
edited by Asti Hustvedt.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references.  
ISBN 1-890951-06-4  
— ISBN 1-890951-07-2 (pbk.)  
1. French fiction — 19th century —  
Translation into English.  
2. Decadence (Literary movement) —  
France. I. Hustvedt, Asti.  
PQ1276.D34D43 1998.  
840.9'11 — DC21

97-53065  
CIP

GRAD  
51810724  
FEB  
69

## Contents

Introduction by Asti Hustvedt 10

### **Les Diaboliques**

by Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly

Introduction by Peter Brooks

31

### **Monsieur Vénus**

by Rachilde

Introduction by Janet Beizer

239

### **A Haven**

by J.-K. Huysmans

Introduction by Charles Bernheimer

367

### **The Future Eve**

by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

Introduction by Asti Hustvedt

497

## **La Faëenza**

by Jean Moréas

Introduction by Françoise Meltzer

751

## ***Selections***

by Guy de Maupassant

Introduction by Phillipe Lejeune

773

## ***Selections***

by Catulle Mendès

Introduction by Barbara Spackman

815

## **The Ritual of Love**

by Joséphin Péladan

Introduction by Jennifer Birkett

841



***Selections***

by Jean Lorrain

Introduction by Jennifer Birkett

879

***Selections***

by Remy de Gourmont

Introduction by Jennifer Birkett

925

***Selections***

by Octave Mirbeau

Introduction by Emily Apter

961

***Selections from Saint Lydwine of Schiedam***

by J.-K. Huysmans

Introduction by Richard Sieburth

1007

**A Select Chronology of Fin-de-Siècle France** 1063

**Biographies** 1077

**Contributors** 1087



# Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to Meighan Gale, the managing editor of Zone Books, for her sustained and invaluable attention to *The Decadent Reader*. I am also grateful to Siri Hustvedt and Michel Feher for their helpful suggestions, and to Paul Auster, Sylvia Molloy, and Denis Hollier for their recommendations and comments. I owe thanks to Emily Apter, Janet Beizer, Charles Bernheimer, Jennifer Birkett, Peter Brooks, Phillipe Lejeune, Françoise Meltzer, Richard Sieburth, and Barbara Spackman not only for the introductions they contributed to this volume, but also for their generous participation in choosing its stories and novels. Finally, I would like to thank Eric Banks, Amy Griffin, Jeanine Herman, Don McMahon, and Mark Roberts.

While this book was going to press, we learned the sad news of Charles Bernheimer's death. I would like to acknowledge here not only his original and compelling reading of J.-K. Huysmans's novel *A Haven*, but also his cheerful and enthusiastic support for this entire project.



# The Art of Death: French Fiction at the Fin de Siècle

by Asti Hustvedt

“The tailends of centuries all look alike,” remarked the fin-de-siècle writer J.-K. Huysmans. It may seem foolish to claim that the final decades of centuries are necessarily years of social decline, but the obsessions of our own culture as the millennium comes to a close seem to resemble those of the last fin de siècle. Crime, pollution, sexually transmitted disease, homosexuality, moral depravity, alcoholism, and tobacco and drug use were topics of constant popular discussion then, as they are now. Simply by measuring time in hundred year cycles, we create the inevitable metaphors of birth and death. At the end of the nineteenth century in France, this metaphor of a dying century became a veritable obsession in popular culture.

The word *decadence* was widely used in fin-de-siècle France to refer to a declining civilization. From the Latin root *decadere*, which means “to fall away from,” *decadence* was employed by critics as a negative epithet, a word uttered as an accusation, a diagnosis of a diseased culture. There were those, however, who embraced the idea of *decadence*. Among those are the writers who appear in this volume, and their work can only be read as a celebration of the fall.

## **Degeneration Theory: The Dark Side of Evolution**

During the nineteenth century, Darwin’s theory of evolution radically altered accepted notions of man’s position in the world. According to the Darwinists, human beings no longer occupied a privileged position in nature, made in the image of God, but were only a more evolved descendant of the ape. Because human beings differed in degree rather than in kind from other animals, their regression to a lower form became a distinct and disturbing possibility. Late-nineteenth-century France generated a vast body of literature, both scientific and fictional, about people in society who were supposedly botched by nature, who were not fully evolved, or who had once been evolved and had now degenerated to a lower form on the evolutionary ladder. Monsters, criminals, savages, prostitutes, syphilitics, hysterics, alcoholics, drug addicts, sexual deviants, madmen, and idiots preoccupied writers of



all kinds: naturalists and decadents, doctors and philosophers.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, then, what is known as the “belle époque,” an era of progress and material prosperity, coincided with a widespread alarm about illness and decay.<sup>2</sup> And while the nineteenth century was undeniably a period aware of its own material improvement and social development, the glory of progress was tainted by an underlying pessimism. The belief that France was moving backward, degenerating morally, politically, culturally, and physically, was nearly universal at the end of the century. The popular press of the day was filled with articles deploring the physical and mental degeneracy of the French, the falling birthrate, the growing number of draft rejects, alcoholism and drug use, the rise in crime, and the spread of syphilis.<sup>3</sup> Scientific research supported these claims, and degeneration was held accountable for almost everything, including France’s humiliating military defeats, the increase in mental illness and suicide (the 1880s saw the highest suicide rate of any decade in nineteenth-century France), homosexuality, hysteria, and prostitution.

Max Nordau’s *Entartung* (the French translation, entitled *Dégénérescence* appeared in 1894) gave a gloomy and phantasmatic account of European — in particular French — decline. Nordau’s text is a long and vituperative attack on fin-de-siècle culture. He defines his era as “curiously confused, a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, of fearful presage and hang-dog renunciation. The prevalent feeling is that of imminent perdition and extinction.”<sup>4</sup> His image for the late nineteenth century is an enervated and debauched body unable to withstand the demands of modern civilization: “the impotent despair of a sick man, . . . the envy of a rich, hoary voluptuary . . . striving in vain to snatch one more sensual pleasure from the uncertain hour.”<sup>5</sup>

To the already long list of degenerates, Nordau adds the fin-de-siècle artist and writer.<sup>6</sup> He diagnosed many of the writers whose work appears in this volume as persons suffering from a variety of degenerative disorders. Barbey d’Aurevilly, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, J.-K. Huysmans, Remy de Gourmont, Jean Moréas, Catulle Mendès, Joséphin Péladan, and other members of what he calls “the school of Baudelaire” are singled out as degenerate, their work understood to be the diseased products of diseased minds. But Nordau did not restrict his diagnosis of degeneracy to the so-called decadents. Tolstoy, Ibsen, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Wagner also fell into the category of diseased.

And while Nordau’s diatribe against decadent literature reads as an exaggerated caricature in the 1990s, it was taken quite seriously in the



1890s: *Entartung* was an enormous success, one of Europe's ten best-selling books of the nineties. The response from the literary world was varied. George Bernard Shaw and William James offered angry rebuttals, as did Remy de Gourmont, who sums up Nordau's thesis in the following manner: "[A]ll novelties are held to be blasphemous, all personal affirmation becomes an act of madness. Monsieur Nordau, who has read, with a bizarre patience, all of contemporary literature, propagates this notion, so wickedly destructive to intellectual individualism, making 'nonconformity' the capital crime for a writer. We differ violently in this regard. The capital crime for the writer is conformity, imitativeness, and submission to rules and to teachings."<sup>7</sup> Zola also protested, not against Nordau's basic argument, but rather to the fact that he had been categorized as a degenerate. He went so far as to undergo medical examinations to show that he had been misdiagnosed. Other artists viewed the book as ridiculous. In fact, there were several who benefited from Nordau's attack. Like America's Jesse Helms, whose violent criticism of obscure artists brought them sudden fame, Nordau publicized the very writers he disparaged.

### The Decadent Movement

In spite of the efforts of a number of scholars — Jean Pierrot, Jennifer Birkett, Barbara Spackman, and David Weir have all written books that challenge the traditional role assigned to decadence — the stigma cast by Nordau lingers and decadence continues to suffer from a bad reputation in French literary studies.<sup>8</sup> Works that fall under the decadent label have been, for the most part, considered marginal, inferior, or unreadable. The general consensus seems to coincide with A.E. Carter, who writes, "the decadent style, with the possible exception of Huysmans' work, produced nothing of value: at best it is amusing, at worst unreadable."<sup>9</sup> The decadent writers Jean Lorrain, Catulle Mendès, Joséphin Péladan, and Rachilde are little known, even in France, though, fortunately, this fact is in the process of changing, with recent editions of their work now available. On the other hand, decadent works that have survived are usually not called decadent: Barbey's *Les Diaboliques* is considered romantic, Maupassant's stories naturalist or realist, work by Moréas, Remy de Gourmont, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, symbolist. And while literary classification is always problematic, with many works not falling neatly into one category, decadence has been especially difficult to define. Because it carries such negative connotations, there are critics who have even suggested that the term be dropped altogether.<sup>10</sup> Others who give decadence a place in literary



history, usually relegate it to a minor position, locating it between more established literary movements.<sup>11</sup> Decadence has been viewed as a development of romanticism or as a transitional movement between naturalism and symbolism, owing its preoccupation with degeneration to the naturalists and its imaginary qualities to the symbolists. Decadence has existed either in a theoretical vacuum or as literary parasite of its richer relatives. And while neither of these views is wholly inaccurate, each is incomplete.

Part of the problem in defining decadence has to do with the fact that a fully developed movement or school never actually existed, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the efforts of Anatole Baju, its self-appointed spokesperson. Between 1886 and 1889 Baju published *Le Décadent*, one of the many literary journals that flourished in late-nineteenth-century Paris. Baju heralded the new age of "decadism," an age in which modern civilization was "deliquescent" (with its connotations of liquification and dissolution) and modern man neurotic. "Just like the rogues of yore," he wrote, "we have picked this epithet up out of the gutter and taken it for our banner."<sup>12</sup> *Le Décadent* published works by Rimbaud (both authentic poems and forgeries), Verlaine, Rachilde, Lorrain, Mendès, Mallarmé, Barbey, and Moréas, as well as articles signed by fictional characters, such as Huysmans's famous decadent, des Esseintes. While the journal was a success in promoting playful scandals and fueling literary wars (between decadence and symbolism, the "rival" school), it never articulated a coherent position, and Baju never succeeded in gaining the respect necessary to become the leader of a literary movement.<sup>13</sup> Eventually, even Baju lost faith in his choice of banners, and changed the name of *Le Décadent* to the positively institutional *La France littéraire et artistique*.

Huysmans's *Against Nature*, published in 1884, is undoubtedly the most famous example of decadent fiction and provides a more articulate doctrine of decadence than any of the various proclamations published in *Le Décadent*. And while not in *The Decadent Reader* (as it is readily available, we chose to print Huysmans's lesser-known *A Haven* and *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam*), its presence is felt in the works included here.<sup>14</sup> *Against Nature*, with its decadent hero, its imagery, themes, and style, is frequently referred to as "the bible of decadence."<sup>15</sup> "We should never forget," wrote Gourmont, "what a huge debt we owe this memorable breviary."<sup>16</sup> Its protagonist, the effete and neurotic Des Esseintes, is the last, degenerate scion in a line of nobility. Profoundly bored and at odds with his era, he retreats from the world of conventional pleasures and ordinary debauchery in search of



new sensations. Des Esseintes's cultivation of artificial worlds and crime, his collections of books, rare gems, scents, and exotic flowers, his taste for Barbey, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Villiers in literature, for Gustave Moreau and Odile Redon in art, his misogynistic conception of woman as embodied syphilis in her natural form and as idol in her artistic form, as well as the novel's broken narrative structure, constitute a decadent manifesto.

While the boundaries that separate decadence from symbolism and naturalism are blurry at best, decadence emerged as a distinct and recognizable literary sensibility in late-nineteenth-century France with the publication of *Against Nature*. Like symbolism, decadence puts forth the idea that the function of literature is to evoke impressions and "correspondences" rather than to realistically depict the world.<sup>17</sup> However, while symbolism was largely a movement in poetry, decadence found its best expression in prose. Like naturalism, decadence takes degeneration as its creative source. But in contrast to Zola and his followers, whose purported (though not necessarily realized) aim was an objective, "scientific" documentation of the world, the decadents aestheticized decay and took pleasure in perversity. In decadent literature sickness is preferable to health, not only because sickness was regarded as more interesting, but because sickness was construed as subversive, as a threat to the very fabric of society. By embracing the marginal, the unhealthy, and the deviant, the decadents attacked bourgeois life, which they perceived as the chief enemy of art.

While united by their hatred for the bourgeoisie, the decadents did not share a political platform, although for the most part they were staunch elitists, self-professed enemies of democracy. When they did involve themselves in politics, they found their places among extremists on both the left and the right — as either monarchists or anarchists — and sometimes they hopped from one position to the other. Barbey and Péladan were militant royalists, as for most of his life was Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who in 1863 claimed he was a candidate for the throne of Greece.<sup>18</sup> He was also, however, rumored to be a dangerous revolutionary. The impoverished aristocrat actually came up with the idea of dragging a corpse through the streets of Paris, in the vain hope of starting another revolution, and he did briefly support the Commune.<sup>19</sup> Catulle Mendès also initially backed the Commune, only to attack it later. Rachilde was an anarchist sympathizer who later became a reactionary, antifeminist patriot. Huysmans and Lorrain were both outspokenly anti-Semitic and anti-Dreyfus. Early in his career, Octave Mirbeau wrote anti-Semitic tracts and referred to democracy as a "fatal



disease" and "that great rotting influence."<sup>20</sup> But later he turned into a Dreyfus supporter, and still later found himself under police surveillance for anarchist involvement. Curious as such violent shuttling between the political right and left may appear, there is an inherent consistency to their political beliefs.

The decadents' main objection to modern bourgeois society was the process of homogenization they associated with it. The decadents despised liberal, capitalist democracy because it purported to make all individuals equal, and to make everything — objects and even ideas — commensurable with money. Distinction of any kind, social, moral, or aesthetic, became more and more difficult to sustain and was viewed either as reactionary or condemned and pathologized as deviant. Consequently, the anti-bourgeois position of the decadents took the form of a nostalgia for a past system of positive distinction (they affected to be monarchists, to long for the old regime), as well as that of a compassionate and passionate commitment to the plight of the new victims of negative distinction — the deviants, the perverts, the foreigners, the poor, anyone who, willingly or not, did not fit into the democratic process of homogenization.

The decadents' anti-Semitism followed a similar pattern. On the one hand, they viewed Jews as the agents of this homogenization. Because Jews seemed to move within every social class — from being advisers to the prince to being socialist agitators, from being bankers to being local shopkeepers, and because they were culturally linked to the circulation of money and therefore with the process of leveling everything through money — they appeared to the decadents to be both the symbol and the catalyst of a modern society without distinction. On the other hand, inasmuch as Jews were rejected by the bourgeoisie for being the embodiment of a dangerous difference that threatened that very homogeneity, the decadents expressed solidarity and empathy.<sup>21</sup>

### **Hysterical Demons and Demonic Hysterics**

The rise of decadence coincides with the heyday of science. Decadent writers responded to the triumph of positivism and its assertion that the world is knowable by turning to mysticism and the occult. Huysmans, whose own well-documented religious life took him from black sabbaths to the monastery, remarks that "[w]orshiping the devil is no more insane than worshiping God. . . . It is precisely at the moment when positivism is at its high-water mark that mysticism stirs into life and the follies of occultism begin."<sup>22</sup> And begin they did. Not unlike the late twentieth century, the late nineteenth century saw an explosion



of eccentric spiritualist groups that dabbled in clairvoyancy, telepathy, séances, hypnotism, and other psychic phenomena. The Order of the Rose-Croix, a peculiar combination of Catholicism and magic founded by "Sar" Péladan is only one example of the many spiritual groups that attracted the decadents. Barbey, Villiers, Huysmans, and Péladan were all at times fanatical Catholics, but as Anatole France writes, "these men savored above all in religion the charms of sin, the grandeur of sacrilege."<sup>23</sup>

Fin-de-siècle France witnessed a form of medical hegemony. Aspects of life which had earlier been outside the realm of medicine now fell under its domain. In particular, the rise of psychiatry as a new scientific discipline made itself felt in the literature of the day. The decadents' scorn for positivism turned to fascination when science applied itself to the study of the unfathomable workings of the insane mind and body. It was Jean-Martin Charcot who gave hysteria, the "*maladie du siècle*," a precise etiology. His international reputation as a brilliant neurologist brought his findings both legitimacy and acclaim. As chief of medical services of the Salpêtrière clinic in Paris, Charcot gave demonstrations of his work with hysterics to a rapt audience, which included artists, actors, socialites, and writers (both Maupassant and Huysmans attended), as well as other physicians and medical students. As has often been noted, Charcot's lecture-demonstrations were highly theatrical. His subjects were hypnotized women, not accidentally the most talented and beautiful women from the hysteria ward, who responded to suggestions at the sound of a gong, the wave of a hand, or the push of an anatomical "button." During these shows, the physician would create a series of spectacular pathologies: a cataleptic woman who could be pierced by needles and pins, a lethargic woman who could be "petrified" into gravity defying postures, and for the grand finale, the somnambulant woman, open to any and all suggestions.<sup>24</sup>

Because Charcot's study of hysteria was permeated by an atmosphere of the occult and supernatural, it is not surprising that the decadents found his work attractive.<sup>25</sup> Charcot's discourse on hysteria borrows heavily from the vocabularies of religion and demonology. Hysterical attacks were broken down into stages called "passional attitudes" which followed the various stages of the Crucifixion. Those who strayed from the prescribed attitudes were called "modern possessed women," and their aberrations "demonic varieties." The word *stigmata*, taken directly from the language of the Passion, was used to describe signs or localized spots of insensitivity on the hysteric's body, a method used to immediately identify the patient as a hysteric.<sup>26</sup>



Charcot ultimately appropriates the very demonology he is debunking, and thereby reintroduces Satan into hysteria. In fact, in 1883, under the direction of Charcot, the Bibliothèque Diabolique was founded in the Salpêtrière, a research library devoted to collecting documents on satanism.

Although Charcot's interest in the historical phenomenon of possession was an attempt to explain it through the illness of hysteria, his use of religious terms and his penchant for the sensational trappings of theater created confusion between the natural and the supernatural. His experiments with hysterics, for example, led to claims of extrasensory perception among the women in question. And while Charcot always insisted, at least theoretically, on separating the natural from the supernatural, his own research often succeeded in doing just the opposite. One of Charcot's favorite experiments consisted in showing the hysteric a card from a completely blank deck, on which he would suggest that there was a specific picture. The deck was then reshuffled, but not before the card with the suggested image was marked discreetly in back so that the physician would be able to identify it. The hysteric was then able to pick out the "picture card," even though it was as blank as all the others.<sup>27</sup> While Charcot was careful not to categorize any of this supersensory phenomena as occult, his science of hysteria breathed new life into age-old ideas of feminine mystery and demonism.

### Medical Monsters and Ideal Corpses

The works collected here have their own assortment of "modern possessed women" — Barbey's *diaboliques*, Villiers's cataleptic clairvoyant, and Huysmans's decomposing saint, to name just a few. Much has already been written about the fact that nineteenth-century novelists, from Flaubert to Zola, borrowed both medical terminology and methodology for use in their writing. The decadents also frequently used the latest medical terminology in their descriptions of pathological characters. However, unlike the naturalists, the decadent writer is less concerned with scientific (that is, hereditary and environmental) explanations for character than he is with the mysterious and ultimately unknowable deviant psyche. The decadent text therefore retains an antipositivist position while borrowing heavily from a positivist vocabulary. An entire catalog of what fin-de-siècle sexologists defined as perversions and pathologies — incest, homosexuality, transvestism, sadism, prostitution, nymphomania, fetishism, hysteria — is found in these narratives. Emily Apter's use of the term "sexological decadence" in her preface to Octave Mirbeau's stories could be applied to all of



the works collected here. And while many fin-de-siècle novels take up these newly theorized and widely publicized deviations, the specificity of the decadent text lies in its treatment of these perversions. By living a life "against nature," the deviant or pervert becomes a hero or heroine in decadent fiction. As Philippe Lejeune shows in his preface, the Maupassant stories included here — "A Divorce Case," "The Tresses," "The Apparition," and "The Unknown Lady" — are constructed as clinical case studies, similar in structure to those collected by the late-nineteenth-century sexologists Jean-Martin Charcot, Valentin Magnan, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. The subject in Maupassant's cases is the fetishist, and in a move that places these tales firmly within the decadent corpus, Maupassant both aestheticizes his characters' perversion and empathizes with their aberrant desire. Aberrant desires are also the subject of Jean Lorrain's explorations into criminal psychology, but with their nymphomaniacs and throat slashers, his stories harbor more dangerous perverts than Maupassant's gentle fetishists.

Many of the deviants portrayed in decadent fiction are women. Despite the fact that civilization at large was widely held to be degenerating, women were particularly prone to atavistic decline. The vulgar application of Darwin to human society placed women near the bottom of the evolutionary ladder, where they could easily fall off and degenerate even further. At the same time, medical theories of sexual difference constructed femininity as inherently diseased. The root of a woman's problems was her reproductive system, and everything from anemia to tuberculosis was thought to be caused by her ovaries and uterus. Just being a woman was a dangerous, pathological condition. In fact, the authoritative *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* includes the entry "Women" among its list of medical ailments.<sup>28</sup>

There is not, it should be noted, a similar entry for "Men." At every moment in the feminine sexual cycle, women were thought to be vulnerable to nervous disorders and hysterical attacks. Puberty, pregnancy or menopause, the loss of virginity, celibacy or promiscuity, were all blamed for abnormal, insane, or criminal acts. In his book on criminal women, Cesare Lombroso discusses the case of a formerly law-abiding woman who murders her children and argues that her violence was caused by her pregnancy.<sup>29</sup> By the end of the century half of all women were thought to be hysterics by the medical establishment, even though only one out of five suffered hysterical attacks. Indeed, hysteria was considered an "exaggeration of woman's temperament."<sup>30</sup> These female monsters, already created by science, were then unleashed on the pages of late-nineteenth-century fiction.



In *Les Diaboliques*, female sexuality burns with danger and destructive power. As Peter Brooks points out in his introduction to Barbey's stories, feminine desire is seen as "a kind of ravenous and ravaging force that permeates the world and works its way through the obstacles of convention and social manners" (p. 33). In Jean Lorrain's story "The Unknown Lady," a sadistic nymphomaniac searches out lovers in the bowels of Paris with the hope that she will one day witness their executions. Overwhelmed by her insatiable appetite, the main character of Moréas's *La Faënza* seduces her own son. In Octave Mirbeau's story "Poor Tom!" the narrator's beautiful new wife demands that he kill his sick and aging dog — the beloved Tom of the title — while she watches with obvious sadistic pleasure. Raoule de Vénérande, the protagonist of Rachilde's novel *Monsieur Vénus*, is a cross-dresser who enjoys beating her male "mistress." In the excerpt from Catulle Mendès's novel *Méphistophéla* (1890), decadent femininity culminates in horror. A lesbian sabbath scene becomes a vision of castration anxiety gone mad: these she-devils carry knives and use them.

The destructive character of woman not only reveals itself in external acts of perversion or violence, but within the body itself. Louise Marle's illness, we are told in *A Haven*, is of a sexual nature and it is consuming her, a fact that baffles not only her husband, Jacques, but the entire Parisian medical establishment. Unresponsive to treatments, her body, like the crumbling château where they seek refuge — itself described as an infirm and hemorrhaging body, with oozing ulcers and inflammations — is in an incredible state of disrepair. As Charles Bernheimer points out in his introduction to the novel, her inexplicable twitches, seizures, and contortions followed by hallucinations and catalepsy correspond to Charcot's symptomology of the hysterical *grande attaque*. Villiers's *The Future Eve* is similarly informed by the psychiatric discourse on hysteria. As I discuss in my introduction to that novel, Edison's ideal woman, the automaton Hadaly, bears an uncanny resemblance to Charcot's hypnotized hysterics at the Salpêtrière.

Beneath the surface of virulent misogyny that pervades these texts is what can be seen as a genuine admiration for the very monsters it creates. The female body occupies a double position in decadent literature, and it is this doubleness that complicates the feminine role in these narratives. Woman is despised because she is closer to nature than man, but also celebrated because she is inherently perverse. The decadents divorce the female from the feminine and create two distinct ideas. The female, the actual female body, is abhorrent because it



is natural. The feminine, however, may be admired because it is duplicitous, mysterious, and finds its ultimate realization in artifice. As Barbara Spackman points out in her introduction to the selections by Catulle Mendès, one of Baju's claims for decadence included the statement: "Man becomes more refined, more feminine, more divine." The trappings of femininity, its artifice — makeup, jewelery, clothing — become weapons in decadent fiction to combat nature. The decadent strategy attempts to empty the female body of its natural content and transform it into a feminine image that is perfectly artificial and completely external.

The divide between the female and the feminine plays itself out in several of the narratives collected here. In *The Haven*, the hideous and bloody trollop and the androgynous Queen Esther who appear in Jacques Marle's dreams exemplify the two sides of decadent femininity. Huysmans had already articulated these types in *Against Nature*: his nightmare vision of an embodied, roving, and female syphilis is countered by Gustave Moreau's adorned and immobile figure of Salome. In both novels, women in their natural state are festering wounds, graphic symbols of castration, but once rendered "feminine," their threat is neutralized through hollowness, and they become ideal, static figures. Huysmans's hagiography, *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam*, is an example of a movement from nature to art in a single character. The decomposing body of his saint, with its fantastic vermin, its suppurating wounds and infested ulcers, its gangrenes, and its cancers is by the end miraculously changed. As Richard Sieburth points out, Huysmans, "like a taxidermist," methodically empties out his saint's body and turns it into a sublime and perfect shell.

The vacant ideal is never easy to come by, however, and elaborate strategies are often necessary. Péladan's "Ritual of Love" (1888) serves as an example of the complex processes needed to turn a natural woman into an androgyne. He outlines these practices in *Comment on devient Mage* (How to become a magus) (1892) and in *Comment on devient Fée* (How to become a fairy) (1893), manuals on the art of loving. Jennifer Birkett frames Péladan's fiction in terms of male desire for women. "Heterosexuality," she writes, "is the field of an epic struggle" between the sexes, in which the role of the woman is to stimulate and satisfy the man without disappointing him. In the selection included here, Nebo attempts to realize this delicate balance, to initiate Paule into the "path of Magus" and transform her into an androgyne. By means of highly choreographed rituals, Nebo succeeds at least temporarily in turning Paule into a work of art. At the moment of trans-



formation, her nakedness is covered by "a dazzling panoply of pearls and gems" (p. 859) and Paule stands before him as an idol, a work of art, "calm and collected in the pose of a hieratic bas-relief" (p. 864).

Decadent fiction turns romanticism on its head. Its drive is to mask nature, to immobilize it, to kill it and replace it with an artificial copy. The statue, the painting, the wax figure, and the automaton are not mere substitutes for nature, they are improvements on it.<sup>31</sup> Given a choice between the woman and the dress, the decadent always chooses the dress. This is literally the case in Remy de Gourmont's story "The Dress." The protagonist falls in love not with a prostitute, but with her gown. When she insists on removing the expensive item before they engage in sex, his desire consumes him, and he murders the woman in order to make love to her dress. This desire for an empty, blank feminine body results both logically and paradoxically in the decadent fascination with the corpse. The corpse as an inanimate shell, drained of life, is raised to new status because, in a switch typical of these writers, the ideal is not found in art imitating life, but in death's imitation of art. The only problem, as the hero of *The Future Eve* points out, is decay. If only, he laments, "death didn't result in the effacing of all human features" (p. 569). Necrophilia or near-necrophilia is the subject of Lorrain's story "The Man Who Loved Consumptives." The title character seeks out consumptives on their death beds, satisfying his perversion with an added bonus: he avoids the "inevitable disillusionment of prolonged relationships" (p. 893).

The inevitable disintegration of the perfect, frozen corpse is solved in a number of these fictions by corpse-copies: paintings, dolls, androids, and wax figures. The setting for these ideal images is never natural. In *A Haven*, the experience of country life is one of panic and disgust. The space best suited to decadent art is urban and interior: the artist's studio, the theater, the masked ball, the boudoir, the laboratory, the dreamscape. The artist's studio in Lorrain's story "The Man Who Made Wax Heads" is littered with wax body parts. In a typical decadent inversion, living women are described as "dolls," while the wax models are "vividly alive." Death becomes life, and life death. It is the male artist who breathes life into empty heads. It is he, like the hypnotist, who controls the scene. "There is no truth in women other than the idea we have of them" (p. 895), writes Lorrain, and in the end, the wax piece that best expresses that truth is an androgynous wax head whose expression is one "petrified by fear." As it turns out, the model for the ideal feminine head was not a woman but a young boy. In this case, even the original of femininity is untainted by a real woman. In



*Monsieur Venus*, a wax replica replaces the corpse of Jacques, the heroine's male mistress. This "anatomical masterpiece" is equipped with a hidden spring in its loins that "comes to life" when the figure's mouth is kissed. Edison's creation in *The Future Eve* is a more elaborate version of Lorrain's and Rachilde's wax works. Hadaly is no mere doll with springs, but an ideal electromagnetic entity, a sublime copy of her flawed, natural model.

The escape from nature inevitably includes an escape from biological procreation, which is either absent in these texts or a source of terror. The birth of a calf in *A Haven* and the conception and birth of human babies in Barbey's *Les Diaboliques* are depicted as less than blessed events. In decadent fiction, marriage is not a sacred institution and the family is not a safe haven: mothers seduce their sons and fathers ruin their children. In Maupassant's "A Divorce Case," the hero is overcome with disgust for his wife as soon as their marriage is consummated. As long as he desired her ideally, she was "divine," but physical union fills him with "contemptuous disgust, disgust with the embrace of love" (p. 796). He turns his attention, or rather his fetishistic obsession, to orchids, because, he explains, they reproduce themselves "without defilement." In *The Future Eve*, Edison proposes doing away with biological women altogether by populating the planet with his artificial and sterile Eves.

### Decadent Style: An Anatomy of Textual Perversion

Although wrong about much, Nordau was right about the influence of Baudelaire on the decadent writers. They did draw inspiration from the poet's "predilection for disease, death and putrefaction (necrophilia)." They did find sustenance in his "sexual aberrations and lasciviousness."<sup>32</sup> Des Esseintes's admiration for Baudelaire, Huysmans writes, "knew no bounds." Baudelaire's horror of the natural and of the female, his cultivation of artificial paradises, his finding of beauty in hideousness, his taste for the bizarre, and his indulgence in "spleen" color all of the writing here. Barbara Spackman discusses the "recycling" of Baudelairean imagery in her introduction to Catulle Mendès, but this borrowing was done by all the decadents.

In *Against Nature*, Huysmans describes Baudelaire through the poet's own images coupled with medical terminology: "he had descended to the bottom of the inexhaustible mine, had picked his way along abandoned or unexplored galleries, and had finally reached those districts of the soul where the monstrous vegetations of the sick mind flourish. There, near the breeding-ground of intellectual aberrations



and diseases of the mind — the mystical tetanus, the burning fever of lust, the typhoids and yellow fevers of crime — he had found, hatching in the dismal forcing-house of ennui, the frightening climacteric of thoughts and emotions.”<sup>33</sup>

With Baudelaire as a guiding light, the decadent writers sought to discover a new style, a language that would reflect their subjects. Nordau’s theory that the decadent mind produces decadent texts is also, at least partially, correct. The conventional use of words and of narrative structure is deliberately subverted in decadent fiction; language deviates from the established norms in an attempt to reproduce pathology on a textual level. With its emphasis on aberration and artifice, the decadents’ approach to the language of fiction frequently leans toward the baroque and the obscure. Huysmans’s account of Baudelaire as one who sought to express “the morbid psychology of the mind that has reached the October of its sensations,”<sup>34</sup> owes much to Théophile Gautier’s 1868 preface to Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil*, which is worth quoting at length. Decadent style, writes Gautier, is

ingenious, complicated, learned, full of shades of meaning and research, always pushing further the limits of language . . . forcing itself to express in thought that which is most ineffable, and in form the vaguest and most fleeting contours; listening that it may translate them, to the subtle confidences of the neuropath, to the avowals of ageing and depraved passion, and to the singular hallucinations of the fixed idea verging on madness. [. . .] In opposition to the classic style, it admits of shading, and these shadows teem and swarm with the larvae of superstitions, the haggard phantoms of insomnia, nocturnal terrors, remorse which starts and turns back at the slightest noise, monstrous dreams stayed only by impotence, obscure phantasies at which the day-light would stand amazed, and all that the soul conceals of the dark, the unformed, and the vaguely horrible, in its deepest and furthest recesses.<sup>35</sup>

Gautier’s description, with its emphasis on pushing language to its limits as a way to express the “ineffable” remains one of the most positive and penetrating accounts of decadent style, even though it was written years before any of the works collected here. And while it would be wrong to claim that there is a uniform decadent style — as the variety of writings collected in this volume illustrate — there are stylistic tendencies among the decadents. Reiterating Gautier, Baju insisted that decadent style “must be rare and tormented, . . . must rejuvenate terms that have become obsolete or transform them into something new.”<sup>36</sup>



Remy de Gourmont called for a style that would capture subtleties of emotion, and Jean Moréas for a revolution in French literature, in which altered states of consciousness would be conveyed on a linguistic level.

The desire for alternative narrative structures that would reflect decadent concerns is realized in different ways by the writers collected in this volume. In *Les Diaboliques*, Barbey uses a complex and labyrinthine narrative structure, employing what Peter Brooks calls "techniques of indirection" in his search to portray "the underside." This underside is never fully articulated, but obscurity is no doubt one of its essential features. Plot is often subordinate to description in these stories. Pure story, the movement from one event to another, is mostly absent. This is reasonable in light of the emphasis on stasis in decadent fiction. Narrative must move, but it can be held up considerably, stopped midway or interrupted. Many of the works in this collection have narratives in which very little happens. In fact, summarizing the plots of these fictions tells very little about them. Mirbeau, as Emily Apter notes, worked to create the grotesque in his prose, similar to the high ornament of art nouveau, which she rightly terms "hysterical" and "panfeminine." Adornment, exoticism, affectation are all willed decadent strategies meant to pervert the texts they made. Decadent texts often live in their descriptive excursions, in their evocations of dreams, mysterious places, and states of mind, in their excess of words not events. The surface of the text, the sounds of the words, point to themselves as manufactured, as illusion. The decadents attempted to create texts that announced themselves as artifice.

Hybrid vocabularies became another way of marking decadent style. As Françoise Meltzer points out in her preface to "La Faëenza," Moréas insists on a stylistic "deformity" in his prose in order to mirror psychic deformity. His story is therefore filled with arcane terms, neologisms, colloquialisms, and slang. Decadent prose intentionally veers from one style to another, borrowing, as Gautier claimed, "from all the technical vocabularies, taking colours from all palettes, notes from all keyboards."<sup>37</sup> Archaic words appear beside the latest technical jargon, slang beside Latin. Expressions from medical treatises, science manuals, anatomy textbooks, works on architecture and agriculture, and popular advertisements intermingle with references to the Bible, myths, art, and high literature. The decadents loved puns, double meanings, and arcane allusion. Many of the narratives included here are loaded with rarified words and distorted syntax, which call attention to the sentences themselves. In 1888, Paul Adam, Moréas's collaborator on



*Thé Chez Miranda*, the collection of stories in which "La Faënza" was first published, created a decadent lexicon: *Petit Glossaire pour servir à l'intelligence des auteurs décadents et symbolistes* (A small glossary to aide the intelligence of decadent and symbolist authors). Filled with linguistic oddities, syncretisms, and archaic words, this volume delights in its lists of perverse, bizarre, and arcane entries.<sup>38</sup>

Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*, on the other hand, has a remarkably lucid narrative. Its decadence is achieved not through a plethora of description or through narrative breaks, but through linguistic cross-dressing. The transvestite characters Raoule and Jacques are given opposite gender signs. Raoule is called "my nephew" by her aunt and refers to herself as "Monsieur de Vénérande." Jacques, her male lover, is called a "mistress" and later in the story a "wife." Janet Beizer refers to "grammatical hermaphrodites" in her preface, those moments in the text when the female Raoule is replaced by the masculine pronoun (and modified by masculine adjectives in the original French), while feminine pronouns and adjectives are used for Jacques. Rachilde perpetuated the same linguistic travesty in other novels, *The Marquise de Sade* and *Madame Adonis*, for example. She also lived it. Her visiting card read: "Rachilde: Man of Letters."

Rachilde's play with her sexual identity is part of the spirit of decadence, which included both irony and self-caricature, a fact that was often missed by the critics. The over-the-top atmosphere and verbal high jinks of the decadents made them ripe for parody. In 1885, such a parody was published under the title *Les Délivances d'Adoré Floupette*. The work created a literary uproar, and despite the fact that it was a flagrant satire, several critics took it seriously. In truth, it is not hard to feel sympathy for those who misunderstood the book's intentions and who attacked it as incomprehensible, pretentious, and pessimistic. Much of decadent writing carries within it both ironic distance and self-parody. Irony and parody are by nature a form of doubling, and this duplicity could only be celebrated by those who called themselves decadents. During the period when these works were written, it was no doubt easy to forget that these writers were also having fun. There is joy, after all, in railing against the pieties of a given historical moment.

The decadents looted the riches of their culture for their own purposes. In an age of medicine, they borrowed its occult mysteries rather than its positivism. From its social Darwinism, they found their monsters: sadists, murderers, transvestites, fetishists, prostitutes, and hysterics. And they reveled in them, completely upending the conven-



tions of romance and sentimentality. In the end, this volume should be read as a collection of love stories. Above all, they are tales of love, not the love with which so many stories end — the love of fidelity, kindness, and fertility — but the other side of love, its cruelty, duplicity, and sterility. In a way, the decadents did accept Nordau's idea of the artist as monster. But in nature, the glory and panacea of romanticism, they found nothing. Theirs is an aesthetic that disavows the natural and with it the body. The truly beautiful body is dead, because it is empty. Decadent work is always morbid, but its attraction to death is through art. What they refused was the condemnation of that monster. And yet despite the decadent celebration of artifice, these stories record art's failure in the struggle against natural horror. Nature fights back and wins, and decadent writing remains a remarkable account of that failure.

---

## NOTES

1. For an excellent discussion of the late-nineteenth-century obsession with decline, see Robert A. Nye, "Degeneration and the Medical Model of Cultural Crisis in the French Belle Epoque," in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of Georges L. Mosse*, eds. Seymour Drescher, David Sabeau, and Allan Sharlin (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982).
2. Written into the theory of degeneration itself is an explanation for this apparent contradiction. While individuals and society at large were seen to be evolving, that very evolution was thought to necessitate degenerative conditions, which were understood to be the natural result of Darwinian adaptations to a new environment. The appearance of degenerative symptoms was interpreted as the price society paid in order to adapt to a newly industrialized milieu.
3. For a general account of fin-de-siècle France, see Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
4. Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), p. 2.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3. The Austrian physician also claims that, along with its other degenerative ailments, his generation also suffered the unfortunate trait of aging more quickly than the previous one. The dramatic increase of precocious baldness, white hair, tooth decay, and the use of spectacles are all cited as examples. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.
6. Significantly, Nordau dedicated his work to the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who, in his 1864 book *Genius and Madness* (translated into French in 1884 with a preface by the Nobel Prize winner Charles Richet, one of Charcot's interns at the Salpêtrière), "scientifically" concludes that the artist is a madman.



7. Remy de Gourmont, *Le Livre des masques* (Paris: Les Editions 1900, 1987), pp. 10–11.
8. Jean Pierrot, in his 1977 book *L'Imaginaire décadent*, translated by Derek Colman as *The Decadent Imagination, 1880–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), challenges the minor role that is generally assigned to decadence and provides a useful overview of decadent themes. Jennifer Birkett's book *The Sins of the Fathers* (London: Quartet Books, 1986) places decadence within a historical perspective and offers insightful, in-depth studies of Huysmans, Gourmont, Péladan, Rachilde, Lorrain, Louÿs, and Mirbeau. In *Decadent Genealogies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) Barbara Spackman analyses the rhetoric of sickness in decadent fiction from Baudelaire to d'Annunzio. And, in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), the most recent book-length study devoted to decadence, David Weir argues provocatively and successfully that decadence is an important prefiguration of modernism.
9. A.E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature (1830–1900)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), p. 143.
10. Richard Gilman argues in favor of banishing "this injured and vacant word from history." See *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).
11. In *Message poétique du symbolisme* (Paris: Nizet, 1961), Guy Michaud argues that decadence is merely a gestatory stage of symbolism. Mario Praz, in *The Romantic Agony*, 2nd ed., trans. Angus Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), sees decadence as a late development of romanticism. For a comprehensive survey of the various conceptions of decadence, see Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, pp. 1–22.
12. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted. *Le Décadent*, no. 33, (Nov. 20, 1886), cited by Marquèze-Pouey in *Le Mouvement décadent en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), p. 187.
13. For more on Baju and his literary reputation, see Marquèze-Pouey, *Le Mouvement décadent*, pp. 186–87.
14. *A Rebours* is currently available in two English translations. All references here are to J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1959.)
15. In *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1908), Arthur Symons called *Against Nature* the "breviary of decadence," a remark that is frequently misquoted as the "bible of decadence." Mario Praz rightfully states that Huysmans's novel is "the pivot upon which the whole psychology of the decadent movement turns." Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, p. 322.
16. Cited by Baldick in his introduction to *Against Nature*, p. 11.
17. The idea of correspondences was taken from Baudelaire's famous sonnet of that name, in which "colors, sounds, and scents" correspond. See Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondences," in *The Flowers of Evil and Paris Spleen*, trans. William H. Crosby (Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, 1991), pp. 28–31.



18. There is no historical verification that Villiers was ever a legitimate candidate for the throne of Greece. According to some, the entire incident was a practical joke instigated by Catulle Mendès. However, as Villiers's closest friend Mallarmé noted, Villiers believed the story to be true.

19. Villiers was inspired by the February Revolution in 1848, which started when a wagon full of corpses was wheeled through working-class neighborhoods. See A.W. Raitt, *The Life of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 102.

20. Octave Mirbeau, *Le Gaulois*, August 25, 1884, cited by Bernard Terramorsi, in "La fin du siècle au le retour d'âge," *Europe*, no. 751-52, (November-December, 1991).

21. The decadents' violent misogyny takes a similar form. In their role as keepers of the household and purveyors of bourgeois morality, women were despised. However, as inherently unstable bodies and potential threats to the social order, women occupied a privileged position in the decadent imagination.

22. Huysmans, cited by Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, p. 91. Elsewhere, in a letter to the unfrocked priest Boullon, Huysmans wrote, "I am tired of the theories of my friend Zola, whose absolute positivism disgusts me, and not less tired of the systems of Charcot, who has tried to prove to me that demoniality is a kind of hysteria. I am even more tired, if possible, of occultists and spiritualists, whose phenomena, although real, are always the same. I wish to confound all these people, to create a work of art of a supernatural realism and of a spiritualist naturalism. I wish to prove to Zola, to Charcot, to the spiritualists and others, that nothing is explained in the mysteries which surround us." Cited by James Laver, *The First Decadent: Being the Strange Life of J. K. Huysmans* (New York: Citadel Press, 1955), pp. 124-25.

23. Anatole France, *La Vie littéraire* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1888-92), vol. 3, p. 301.

24. Axel Munthe, an English physician who studied for several years at the Salpêtrière, provides the following firsthand account of one of Charcot's demonstrations: "The huge amphitheatre was filled to the last place with a multicoloured audience drawn from *tout* Paris, authors, journalists, leading actors and actresses, fashionable demi-mondaines, all full of morbid curiosity to witness the startling phenomena of hypnotism almost forgotten since the days of Mesmer and Braid. . . . [During the somnambulist phase] some of them smelt with delight a bottle of ammonia when told it was rose water, others would eat a piece of charcoal when presented to them as chocolate. Another would crawl on all fours on the floor, barking furiously when told she was a dog, flap her arms as if trying to fly when turned into a pigeon, lift her skirts with a shriek of terror when a glove was thrown at her feet with a suggestion of being a snake. Another would walk with a top-hat in her arms rocking it to and fro and kissing it tenderly when she was told it was her baby." Axel Munthe, cited by Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady* (London: Virago Press, 1987), p. 148.

25. Charcot was dubbed the "Prince of Darkness" by the popular press. His entire office — its walls and all of its furnishings — were painted black, and several engravings



of scenes of demonic possession hung on the wall, almost as though the neurologist were trying to reinforce his public image.

26. In fact, the process of locating stigmata to identify a hysteric repeats, in an amazingly similar way, the ritual used to identify witches in the the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In both cases, the suspect was stripped and pricked with pins. When the needle yielding practitioner came to a spot that was insensitive to pain, he had discovered the stigmata — proof positive that his subject was a witch or a hysteric.

27. Moreover, the hallucinated image on the card would continue indefinitely, long after the hysteric had been revived from her trance. Blanche Wittman, the "Queen of the Hysterics," had an entire collection of such portraits which gave her "the greatest pleasure." She kept them safely tucked away in a drawer and would take them out from time to time, displaying them on her bed and gazing at her favorites. See Gilles de la Tourette, *L'Hypnotisme et les états analogues au point de vue médico-légal* (Paris: Plon, 1889), pp. 124-25.

28. See, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, directeur A. Dechambre (quatrième série) (Paris: P. Asselin et G. Masson, 1864-89).

29. Cesare Lombroso, *The Female Offender* (Littleton, CO: Fred B. Rothman & Co., 1980), p. 294. Pregnancy was held responsible for all sorts of deviant behavior. Lombroso cites Dr. S. Icard, another leading authority on women's maladies, who claims: "When in this state [pregnancy] a woman is capable of anything. Passionately loving mothers will cut their children's throats; and others, naturally good, will pass as victims, and invent infamous calumnies against their dear ones; while chaste women will talk and act in the most indecent manner" (*ibid.*, p. 295).

30. Dr. Grasset, "Hystérie," in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, p. 241.

31. "How inferior the human machine is, compared to man-made machines," remarked Huysmans. "They can be decoked, unscrewed, oiled and parts replaced. Decidedly, nature is not a very wonderful thing." Letter to Arij Prins, August 11, 1886, in *The Road from Decadence: From Brothel to cloister: Selected Letters of J. K. Huysmans*, ed. and trans. Barbara Beaumont (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), p. 76.

32. Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 296.

33. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, pp. 146-47.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

35. Gautier, cited by R.K.R. Thorton in *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 19.

36. *Le Décadent*, October 16, 1886, cited by Carter, *The Idea of Decadence*, p. 136.

37. Gautier, cited by R.K.R. Thorton in *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 19.

38. Adam published the *Petit Glossaire pour servir à l'intelligence des auteurs décadents et symbolists* under the pseudonym Plowert; see Marquèze-Pouey, *Le Mouvement décadent*, p. 171.



# **Les Diaboliques**

by Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly

---

Translated by Ernest Boyd

Introduction

by Peter Brooks



# Erotic Melodrama and Narrative Ricochet

by Peter Brooks

When J.-K. Huysmans published the bible of decadence, *Against Nature*, in 1884, the most prescient book review came from a man forty years his senior, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly. "After such a book," wrote Barbey d'Aurevilly, "it only remains for the author to choose between the muzzle of a pistol or the foot of the cross." When Huysmans evoked this review twenty years later, in his preface to a reprint of *A Rebours*, he added: "C'est fait" — it's done. He had chosen the cross, become a convert.

This small episode in literary history says much about Barbey's relation to the Church and to Decadence. A flamboyant Catholic and reactionary who was an old man by the time "Decadence" became a literary watchword — he was born in 1808 — Barbey's sensibility nonetheless resembles the Decadents, his Catholicism seems ever to border on satanism, and his greatest work, *Les Diaboliques*, was seized by the police for offense to public morality. Barbey shares many affinities with his younger contemporary, Baudelaire, whose *Les Fleurs du mal* he greeted upon its publication in 1857 with the remark that Baudelaire's talent is "the flower of evil blooming in the hothouse of decadence." Barbey and Baudelaire together remind us that Decadence was a species of late Romanticism, developing the Romantic sensibility of the spiritual into a peculiarly exacerbated preoccupation with artifice, sin, beauty, and crime.

Born in the Cotentin Peninsula — the most remote part of Normandy — into a family of the petty nobility that had fallen in the world, Barbey himself became a self-created artifice, a dandy, someone who abstracts himself from sordid reality by insisting that his own high style shapes both his life and his art. The dandy is willfully eccentric, cultivating mannerisms that distinguish him from the herd. He has developed Romantic individualism into the cult of personal vanity, insisting on his difference from the rest of the world and on the peculiar importance of his own tastes, nerves, sensitivities, aesthetic preferences. Like Baudelaire, Barbey was a theoretician of *dandysme*, publishing an essay on the Englishman Beau Brummel, whom they both admired



as the fountainhead of the kind of sensibility that no doubt reached its fullest realization later in the century with Oscar Wilde.

Barbey's literary vanity was considerable, and much frustrated. Dividing his life between Paris and the small Norman town of Valognes — still nearly feudal in its ways, according to Barbey's rendition of it (usually named only as "V——") in his writing — Barbey became an acerbic journalist and a novelist prized by the connoisseurs but not the successful and well-known author he desperately wanted to be. Still today, despite a clear rise in his reputation, his dark novels — *Le Chevalier des Touches*, *L'Enfermée*, *Un Prêtre marié*, *Une Vieille Maîtresse* — resist assimilation into the mainstream of readership. Success came with the collection of six novellas, *Les Diaboliques*, in 1874. But it was a *succès de scandale* that struck terror in the sixty-six-year-old author. Alarmed by the reviews of *Les Diaboliques*, the public prosecutor's office seized those copies still at the printer (some 480 from a total of 2,200 printed) and initiated a prosecution of the author. Terrified of appearing on the *banc des accusés* in court, Barbey had recourse to a number of influential friends and eventually struck a bargain with the prosecutor, by which he agreed never to republish *Les Diaboliques* — an agreement broken nine years later, when Lemerre issued a new edition. *Les Diaboliques* thus escaped the fate of becoming, like Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the object of a trial concerning the morality of literature. He hadn't Baudelaire's and Flaubert's courage. He also, he well knew, had more enemies than they, because of his eccentricities, his reactionary (and somewhat incoherent) politics, and especially his acerbic journalism: Emile Zola, in particular, couldn't abide Barbey and took pleasure in denouncing his cowardice.

More than a century later, we can still appreciate what it was in *Les Diaboliques* that alarmed the censors. There are few examples, even in French literature, of a book so thoroughly obsessed with eroticism, with the marriage of the erotic and crime, with the pleasures of blasphemy, and with female sexuality seen — from a thoroughly masculinist point of view — as a kind of ravenous and ravaging force that permeates the world and works its way through the obstacles of convention and social manners. The "devils" of Barbey's title are all women, stronger than the men who love them and abuse them, and they all — somewhat in the manner of the dandy — insist that life and love meet them on their own terms, that they have an absolute right to the erotic, and that the erotic is the dominating power of existence. Barbey's stories often remind one of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in that they



stage a dialectics of eros and the death drive where the apparent opposition of the two principles is a deep collusion.

But Barbey's erotic satanism on the whole escapes the more facile forms given to it by many a minor French Romantic. For the tales of *Les Diaboliques* are masterpieces of formal complexity, of the art of telling, in ways that renew and revitalize the storytelling tradition. "Would not hell glimpsed through some small window be far more terrifying than if beheld in its entirety in a single sweeping gaze?" says the narrator of *Beneath the Cards of a Game of Whist*, suggesting Barbey's techniques of indirection (p. 134). What matters is less the underworld than one's approaches to it, one's glimpses of it, the way it makes its latent presence felt in everyday reality. Barbey as storyteller reminds one of Henry James, who adapted the French novella to similar purposes in tales such as *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Beast in the Jungle*, which play out individuals' perceptions of occult forces at work, without ever specifying the nature of these forces — indeed, without ever giving us any sure basis for deciding that they do exist, except by way of the ravages they work.

"Make [the reader] *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications," wrote James in his preface to *The Turn of the Screw*. And he continued: "My values are positively all blanks, save so far as an excited horror, a promoted pity, a created expertness . . . proceed to read into them more or less fantastic figures."<sup>1</sup> These comments are suggestive of Barbey's strategies as well: create a situation in which the reader is led into an intense speculative relation to the horrors the text implies more than demonstrates, let the reader fill in the blanks — while preventing the reader from reaching any certainty about the content of those blanks. Barbey, to be sure, cannot resist dramatizing moments of melodramatic excess. Nonetheless, the central dramas of his tales often remain enigmatic, their motivations obscure. They are known mainly, and only partially, through their results, and through the commentary of observers and listeners who do not have full access to the "truth."

These characteristics are in full evidence in the earliest composed tale, *Beneath the Cards of a Game of Whist*. Like the other tales, this one is highly "spoken," transmitted by various narrators in a simulation of oral storytelling. A first narrator presents a Parisian salon dedicated to good conversation, "a kind of delectable Coblentz, a refuge for the elegant conversation of days gone by" (p. 131) — Coblentz being the town in which many *émigré* French aristocrats took refuge during the French Revolution. This first narrator introduces the primary story-



teller, who tells a story witnessed — though that word will need qualification — during his youth in a provincial Norman town, where the proud, ruined, and bored aristocracy invests its repressed passions in playing cards. The story concerns the arrival of a Scots gentleman, Marmor de Karkoël, who achieves celebrity through his dexterity at the game of whist and then apparently seduces the cold and seemingly chaste Comtesse du Tremblay de Stasseville, and possibly her daughter Herminie as well, and maybe poisons them both — or does the mother first poison the daughter? — before decamping for India. This second narrator himself becomes a listener to part of the story he doesn't know when, years later, the Chevalier de Tharsis tells him of the mysterious death of Mme de Stasseville, following that of her daughter, a month after Marmor's departure, and of the discovery, in a large planter in Mme de Stasseville's drawing room, of the body of an infant. But Tharsis can only provide "frightful conjectures" about what happened, and in some ways his listener thinks he knows more than the speaker, since he witnessed Marmor pouring a subtle poison into the hidden compartment behind the stone of a ring. This happened a fortnight before the famous "diamond game," which appears to be crucial to the tale, during which Herminie's death-foreshadowing cough and a flash of light off Mme de Stasseville's diamond ring occur simultaneously, in a suggestive conjunction — which never becomes a causal explanation of what has happened. Is this a "coincidence," as the storyteller calls it at one point, or is Mme de Stasseville's ring, again in his words, a "murderous jewel"?

One can never know. And in the absence of knowledge of what really occurred in the blanks left in the story, the reader's attention is directed anew to the listeners to the tale told in the Parisian salon: "Each member of the audience was wrapped in thought, endeavoring, with what power of imagination he possessed, to combine the detached details, which were all he had to go on, and complete this real-life romance" (p. 166). The first narrator is reduced to trying to read not the story but its effects, particularly on the Comtesse de Damnaglia, who is said to have "a force of character sufficient to hide under an unruffled exterior the fierce emotions and occult satisfaction of an intensely passionate nature" (p. 167). Yet from his seat he cannot see her face, only her back — though that back "was studded with little beads of perspiration, had a tale of its own to tell" (p. 167). This attention to listeners' reactions points the way to what matters most to Barbey, as to James: the reactions of the real-life reader, the way he or she has been enticed into the story and must attempt to construct it with all the passion and uncertainties of its fictive audience.



*Ricochets de conversation* — “conversational ricochets” — was Barbey’s first title for this story, and it well describes the technique of most of *Les Diaboliques*, where tellers and listeners exchange facts, interpretations, suppositions that carrom around at oblique angles. Walter Benjamin maintained that the purpose of traditional oral storytelling was quite simply the transmission of wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Barbey plays all sorts of games with this “wisdom,” tending finally to lodge it — somewhat in the manner of Freud describing the psychoanalytic transference — in exchange itself, in the dialogue of transmission in which teller and listener, in competition and in collaboration, attempt to construct the story.

The underside of the cards — to the extent that we will ever know them — have to do with erotic passion, invested into card games, then reinvested from card games back into murderous passion. Passion and death are constants in *Les Diaboliques*, from the opening tale, *The Crimson Curtain* — in which the lighted window covered by its crimson curtain becomes the frame for a story of mute and unmotivated passion whose ending we will never know — to the last, *A Woman’s Revenge*, in which the Duchesse d’Arcos de Sierra-Leone sacrifices her body and her life to produce a story that will bring eternal opprobrium on her husband. One of the most curiously marked by the absence of event — where the absence of event is indeed the very central “event” — is *The Greatest Love of Don Juan*. Once again, the storyteller is in a social group — highly charged erotically, since all the listeners gathered in the boudoir of the Comtesse de Chiffrevas are former mistresses of Comte Ravila de Ravilès. When they ask him to recount the most flattering conquest of his life, he gives them the story of an innocent young girl who sits down in an armchair from which Ravila has just risen, and feels her body inflamed — with yet more remarkable imagined results.

In *At a Dinner of Atheists*, the storytelling situation is quite different: a gathering of cynical freethinkers that leads to recounting tales about women and also to the explanation — rather fully given, for once — of what the old soldier Mesnilgrand was doing in a church the week before. Through the meanders and interruptions of stories ricocheting off one another, we finally come to Mesnilgrand’s tale of Rosalba, oxymoronically known as *la Pudica*, which ends in a scene of such atrocious and operatic blasphemy, vengeance, and homicide that the reader may decide that Barbey has transgressed all bounds of taste and discretion. Yet it should be noted that the punishment meted out to Rosalba by her jealous lover, Major Ydow, emblemizes Barbey’s nar-



rative preoccupation with the stories told on and by women's passionate bodies. If most of his storytellers are men, exchanging lore about the "dark continent" of women, the object of the stories is that told and retold enigma of the woman. Woman, especially her sexuality, provides the object of endless commentary, description, supposition. But the result of all the telling only deepens the enigma and makes woman's erotic force something that male storytelling can never quite explain or contain.

If one had to choose "the best" of this remarkable set of novellas, I think I might settle on *Happiness in Crime*. The title itself is a typical Barbey oxymoron: happiness in crime is a monstrous moral contradiction. That Comte Serlon de Savigny and Hauteclair Stassin poison Savigny's wife and then appear to live happily ever after presents a problem to Dr. Torty, who will be the narrator of their story, told to the first narrator who introduces him, who has just shared with Torty the spectacle of the superb couple formed by Savigny and Hauteclair. Torty scrutinizes this happiness to see if he can't find a blot on it. "Happiness has no story," Torty tells his interlocutor (p. 129). On the other hand, crime is preeminently the stuff of story. If Torty could find the fracture in their happiness, a kind of *crime dans le bonheur*, he might be able to go beyond *le bonheur dans le crime*. Such is his intention: "I have searched the life of these two beings to see if there was not, in their astonishing and revolting happiness a flaw, a crack, however small, in some secret place . . ." (p. 125).

Torty is presented to us by the first narrator as an observer, materialist, and scientist. He is a "naturalist" who, from long study of social laws, has become one of those "observers [who] could not fail to be a misanthrope" (p. 96). He tells his listener that the doctor is the "confessor of modern times," the replacement for the priest in an age of scientific materialism. Obligated to keep the secrets of the confessional, he announces he will keep his promise as well as the priest: that is, he will violate it. And as Torty gets into his story, we realize more and more that the observer is also a voyeur, someone whose desire to penetrate the truth of the story he witnesses and tells leads to spying and even to complicity.

Much of Torty's spying seems to be focused on Hauteclair's body, which itself represents the problem of finding the secrets he is after. Hauteclair is the daughter of a former Napoleonic soldier who, during the Restoration — when the Bourbons returned to the throne — opens a fencing school in the Norman town of V—— for the local nobility. He is known as *La Pointe-au-Corps* — the thrust to the body — a



name grammatically feminine yet clearly phallic in implication. When he has a daughter, he names her Hauteclaire after the sword of the epic hero Roland's companion-in-arms, Olivier, an uncanonical fore-name that is again grammatically feminine but existentially, as it were, masculine. She grows up to be a peerless fencer. In general, she is visible to the men of V—— only from behind her fencer's mask, and in the fencer's costume, which both reveals and protects her body. "Hauteclaire was dressed — if it may be called dressed," Torty says at one point, "in a chamois jacket that fit like a breastplate and in the tightly fitting silk breeches that showed all the muscular contour of her legs. . . . [These] tightly fitting clothes [made her] seem naked" (p. 119). This costume that is like nudity in its molding of Hauteclaire's body, but also a thoroughgoing defense of her body (and none of the men manages to touch her in their duels), figures the problem encountered by Torty's prying observation. Hauteclaire is "impenetrable"; Torty cannot find the "fault" or "crack" he needs to make his story complete.

Here, as in *Beneath the Cards of a Game of Whist*, there is some question whether there is really a story that can be told, in its entirety, in a way that would make sense of the observable phenomenon. As Torty says when he begins his narration, in another image having to do with things hidden in the body: "My dear fellow, you must search pretty deeply for the beginning of this story, as you would for a bullet over which the flesh has formed; for oblivion is like the flesh of living things which forms over events and prevents you from seeing anything, or even suspecting the place after a certain time" (p. 101). Can the true story be found? Can it be told? When Torty tells us that he would like to write a "treatise on teratology" concerning this sublime couple of monsters, he may suggest that he is reduced to the last resort of scientific observers when the object of their scrutiny falls outside the usual taxonomical systems. A treatise on monsters is not quite the same thing as the story of Savigny and Hauteclaire's crime. If Torty knows a considerable amount about that crime, he has also, we discover, been under the seal of a deathbed promise not to tell it. Furthermore, we may detect that Torty's own relation to that crime is not simply that of the observer. "Observation at any price," as he calls his attitude, may come at a high price, especially when the results are so frustrating (p. 117). As in most of *Les Diaboliques*, we get less the story itself than the story of finding and telling that story.

Through all the meanders of storytelling in *Happiness in Crime*, including the interrogative interruptions of the listener pressing for



the satisfaction of his curiosity, what may stand out most clearly and memorably is Hauteclair's body, pitted against the lithe panther in its cage at the outset of the novella, then seen in the fencer's costume, or in disguise as the chambermaid Eulalie, or once again revealed after her marriage to Savigny. As in most of the other *Diaboliques*, it is the force and power of a woman that dominates the tale — as clearly Hauteclair dominates Savigny. If the curiosity of Torty and his male interlocutor and the tendency of curiosity to become voyeurism suggest the unregenerate masculinist stance that appears to reign in all the tales, the objects of curiosity and desire are not so easy to classify. Barbey clearly admires his "monsters," his "she-devils," and any moral hand-wringing that goes on in the tales appears a tepid sop to convention. Hauteclair, like Mme de Stasseville, and Alberte, and Rosalba, and the Duchesse de Sierra-Leone, has defied convention and made a bid for individual freedom that gives her an exceptional destiny. In their exceptional, exemplary destinies, Barbey's heroines resemble his heroic ideal of the dandy. In both cases, there is a refusal to accept reality as given, an insistence that social conventions and standard narratives can be bent to one's own ends. More than most heroines of nineteenth-century French fiction, who tend to reach tragic impasses or unsatisfactory compromises, Barbey's heroines achieve a certain hyperbolic success — though they do not all live happily ever after, by any means.

I am not making a claim for Barbey as a feminist: his view of women remains indelibly marked by Romantic polarities of angel and whore and by a scopophilic male objectification of woman as sexual demon. Yet there is a certain empowerment of women in Barbey's erotic melodramas. He is capable of complicating the Romantic polarities, asserting that the angelism of a heroine such as Hauteclair lies precisely in her sexuality. As a self-styled reactionary who frequently evokes the Old Régime with nostalgic affection, Barbey reaches back to the freedom and power associated with such freethinking flouters of convention as the celebrated Ninon de Lenclos, or Choderlos de Laclos's Marquise de Merteuil.

But Barbey's reemergence from relative obscurity into his present place as a "classic," if only for this one book, may have less to do with the power of fascination exercised by his heroines, and more with his narrative powers. In *Happiness in Crime*, the first narrator's reflections on the name of the principal storyteller, Torty, emblemizes Barbey's storytelling: there is something "knotted," twisted, *retors*, perverse in this narration. It is full of detours, digressions, twists. Narrative dis-



course invades the story, giving a plot that is turned around, per-verse. The technique simulates oral storytelling — storytelling in a witty conversational mode, offered to an intimate audience. As a result, it is narration that always implicates what is sometimes called the “narratee”: the listener, the person on whom the story is supposed to have an effect. The way the narratee is implicated in a narrative that rarely says everything — that leaves central blanks and gaps — invites the reader to participate as well in the construal and construction of plot and meaning. In the participation of the reader, the story takes its effect, enters another understanding, another life. Tales told, Barbey suggests, ought to make a difference.

---

#### NOTES

1. Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. liv.
2. Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969).





## CONTENTS

THE CRIMSON CURTAIN .....	43
THE GREATEST LOVE OF DON JUAN .....	78
HAPPINESS IN CRIME .....	95
BENEATH THE CARDS OF A GAME OF WHIST	131
AT A DINNER OF ATHEISTS .....	167
A WOMAN'S REVENGE .....	209

# LES DIABOLIQUES

by Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly

## THE CRIMSON CURTAIN

A CONSIDERABLE NUMBER of years ago I went to shoot waterfowl in the western marshes, and, as there was no railway then, I took the stagecoach of ——— that passed the crossroads near the Château de Rueil and at that precise moment carried only one passenger inside. This person, a very remarkable man in every respect, and whom I knew, having often met him in society, I will ask your permission to introduce as the Vicomte de Brassard. The precaution is probably useless! The few hundred people who constitute Parisian society are, no doubt, able to supply the real name. It was about five o'clock in the evening. The sun shed its slanting rays on a dusty road, edged with poplars and fields, through which we dashed, drawn by four stout horses, whose strong flanks rose heavily at each crack of the postilion's whip — the postilion, like life, cracking the whip too much at the outset!

The Vicomte de Brassard was at that time of life when he was no longer disposed to crack his whip. But he was one of those men worthy of being English (he was educated in England), who, if he had been mortally wounded, would have died declaring he was alive. In the world, and even in books, we are used to laughing at the pretensions to youth of those who have passed the happy age of inexperience and foolishness — and the custom is not a bad one when the pretensions take a ridiculous form; but when they do not, when on the contrary they assume a pride that will not confess defeat, I do not say they are not senseless, for this is useless, but they are beautiful, like so many senseless things. If it was heroic of the Guards of Waterloo to die and not surrender, it is the same when we are face to face with old age, which is not, however, as romantic as bayonets. Some heads are built in a military manner, never to surrender, and that is the whole question, as it was at Waterloo!

The Vicomte de Brassard, who has not surrendered (he is still alive, and I will tell you about him later, for it is worth knowing), the Vicomte



de Brassard was then, at the time I traveled with him in the stagecoach of ———, what society, which is as spiteful as a young woman, rudely calls "an old beau." For those who care little for words or figures, and who deem that in the matter of age a man is only as old as he appears to be, the Vicomte de Brassard might have passed for a "beau" without any qualification. At least, at that very time the Marquise de V——, who was an expert on young men and who had shorn a dozen men as Delilah had shorn Samson, proudly carried, in a large enameled gold bracelet, a lock of the vicomte's mustache, which time, or the devil, had turned russet. Only, old or not, do not attach to the word "beau," as society has done, an idea of someone frivolous, puny, and slight, for you would not have a proper idea of the Vicomte de Brassard, in whom everything — intellect, manners, physiognomy — was large, rounded, opulent, redolent of patrician calmness, as befitted the most magnificent dandy I have ever known — I, who have seen Brummel go mad and d'Orsay die!

For he was truly a dandy. If he had been less so, he would certainly have become marshal of France. In his youth he had been one of the most brilliant officers of the latter days of the First Empire. I have heard it said many times by his regimental comrades that he was distinguished by the bravery of a Murat added to that of a Marmont. Along with that he was cool and levelheaded when the drums were not beating, and he could have soared to the highest rank of the military hierarchy had it not been for dandyism. If you combine dandyism with the qualities that make up an officer — discipline, regularity, and so forth — you will see how much of the officer will remain and whether he does not blow up like a powder keg! If the Vicomte de Brassard never exploded, it was because, like all dandies, he was happy. Mazarin would have employed him — and so would have Mazarin's nieces, but for another reason: he was gorgeous.

He had had that beauty necessary to a soldier more than to anyone else, for there is no youth without beauty, and the army is the youth of France! It was that kind of beauty, moreover, which seduces not only women, but circumstances themselves — the rascals — and it was not the only protection spread over the head of Captain de Brassard. He was, I believe, of a Norman family, of the stock of William the Conqueror, and he had, it is said, conquered a good deal himself. After the abdication of the emperor, he had naturally gone over to the Bourbons, and, during the Hundred Days, had remained supernaturally faithful to them. So, when the Bourbons came back for the second time, the vicomte was made a Chevalier of Saint-Louis and decorated



by Charles X (then Monsieur) with his own royal hand. During the whole Restoration, the handsome de Brassard never once mounted guard at the Tuileries without the Duchesse of Angoulême addressing a few gracious words to him as she passed. She, in whom misfortune had slain graciousness, managed to find some for him. The minister, seeing this favor, would have done all he could to advance the man whom madame thus singled out; but, with the best will in the world, what could be done for this terrible dandy who, to the shame of his regiment, had drawn his sword on the inspecting general for having made a remark about his service? It was quite enough to save him from a court martial. This careless disdain of discipline always distinguished the Vicomte de Brassard.

Except when on a campaign, when he was a thorough officer, he was never amenable to discipline. Many times he had been seen secretly leaving his garrison — at the risk of prolonged imprisonment — to go and amuse himself in a neighboring town, and only return when there was a review or a parade — warned by one of the soldiers, for if his superiors scarcely cared to have under their orders a man to whom all routine and discipline were repugnant, the soldiers, on the other hand, adored him. To them he was superb. He only required that they be brave, punctilious, and neat and thus realize the old type of the French soldier, as he is depicted so charmingly and precisely in *La Permission de dix heures*, and in three or four old songs, which are masterpieces. He was, perhaps, too fond of making them fight duels, but he asserted it was the best means he knew to develop the military spirit. "I am not the government," he said, "and I have no medals to give them when they fight bravely among themselves, but the orders of which I am the grandmaster (he had a considerable private fortune) are gloves, spare cross-belts, and whatever may spruce them up — so far as the regulations will allow."

So the company that he commanded eclipsed in beauty and allure all the other companies of the Grenadiers of the Guard, brilliant as they were. Thus he flattered to excess the soldiers, who in France are always prone to fatuity and coquetry, two permanent provocations, the one because of the tone it takes, the other because of the envy it arouses. It will easily be understood, after this, that all the other companies were jealous of his. Men would fight to get into it, and then had to fight to stay there.

Such had been, during the Restoration, the exceptional position of Captain Vicomte de Brassard. And as there was not at this time, as there was during the Empire, the resource of heroic acts that allow all to be



forgiven, no one could have foreseen or guessed how long this insubordination that astonished his comrades, and that he showed toward his superiors with the same audacity that he would have shown toward his life if he entered fire, would have lasted. But the Revolution of 1830 happened just in time to relieve him of the humiliation of being cashiered. He was badly wounded during the Three Days and disdained taking service under the new dynasty of the Orleans, which he despised. When the Revolution of July made them masters of a country they did not know how to keep, it found the captain in bed, laid up with an injury to his foot sustained while dancing — as he would charge — at the Duchesse de Berry's last ball.

But at the first drum roll he nevertheless rose and joined his company, and since he could not put on his boots on account of his wound, he went to the rioting as he would have gone to a ball, in polished shoes and silk stockings, and it was thus he led his grenadiers to the Place de la Bastille, charged as he was with clearing the whole length of the boulevards.

Paris, in which no barricades had yet been erected, had a gloomy and terrible appearance. It was deserted. The sun glared down like a fiery rain, soon to be followed by another; from behind the closed shutters of every window death would soon pour forth.

Captain de Brassard arranged his men in two lines, along each row of houses and as close to them as possible so that each file of soldiers was exposed only to the fire from the houses across, while he, more dandified than ever, walked down the middle of the road. Aimed at from both sides by thousands of guns, pistols, and carbines, all the way from the Bastille to the Rue de Richelieu, he was not hit, despite the breadth of his chest, of which he was perhaps a little too proud — for Captain de Brassard swelled out his chest in a fight as a beautiful woman who wants to show off her charms does at a ball — when, just as he arrived in front of Frascati's, at the corner of the Rue de Richelieu, and at the moment when he commanded the troops to amass to clear away the first barricade he had found on his road, he took a bullet in this magnificent chest, which was doubly tempting, both on account of its size and the long silver braid that sparkled across his shoulders, and he also had his arm broken by a stone — which did not prevent him from carrying off the barricade and proceeding as far as the Madeleine at the head of his excited soldiers.

There, two ladies in a carriage, who were fleeing from the Paris insurrection, seeing an officer of the guard wounded, covered with blood, and lying on the blocks of stone that then surrounded the Madeleine,



which was still in course of construction, placed their carriage at his disposal, and he was taken by them to the Marshal de Raguse at Gros-Caillou, to whom he said, in military fashion: "Marshal, I have not, perhaps, more than two hours to live, but during those two hours put me wherever you like."

Only he was wrong. He was good for more than two hours. The bullet that went through him did not kill him. I met him more than fifteen years later, and he claimed then that, in defiance of medicine and his doctor, who had expressly forbidden him to drink while he still had the fever caused by his injury, he had been saved from a certain death only by drinking Bordeaux wine.

And how he did drink! For, dandy as he was, he drank as he did everything else — like a Pole. He had a splendid goblet of Bohemian glass made, which held a whole bottle of Bordeaux, by God, and he would drain it in one breath. He would say afterward that he always drank like that — and it was true. But in these days, when strength of every kind is continually diminishing and is no longer thought much of, it may seem that this feat is nothing to boast about. He was like Bassompierre and could take his wine as he did. I have seen him drink a dozen of his Bohemian glassfuls without seeming any the worse for it. I have often seen him also at those meals that respectable people call "orgies," and of intoxication that, with a soldier's grace, he called "being a little tight," while touching the tip of his cap in a military gesture. I — who wish to make you understand what sort of man he was, in order that you may follow my story — may as well tell you that I have known him to keep seven mistresses at the same time, like a nineteenth-century braggart, as the sixteenth century would have called him in its picturesque language. He called them, poetically, "the seven strings of his lyre" — and I must say I disapprove of his speaking in this jesting and musical way of his own immorality. But what would you have? If Captain Vicomte de Brassard had not been all that I have had the honor of telling you, my story would have been less stimulating, and I probably would not have thought of telling it to you.

I certainly did not expect to find him there when I got into the stage-coach at the Château de Rueil crossroads. We hadn't seen each other for a long time, and I took much pleasure in the prospect of spending several hours in the company of a man who belonged to our time and yet differed so much from the men of our day.

The Vicomte de Brassard, who could have worn the armor of Francis I as easily as he did the slender, blue officer's coat of the Royal Guard, resembled in neither his proportions nor his appearance today's vaunted



young men. This setting sun, so grandly elegant and enduringly radiant, made the little crescent moons now rising in the distance look pale and thin. He had the beauty of the Emperor Nicholas, whom he resembled in body, though his face was less ideal and his profile less Greek, and he wore a short beard, which, like his hair, had remained black in some mysterious way. This beard grew high on his ruddy and manly cheeks. Beneath his noble forehead — a rounded, unwrinkled forehead, as white as a woman's arm and which the grenadier's cap had made even vaster and prouder by making his hair fall out on top, as these caps and helmets do — were two dark-blue eyes, almost hidden beneath the brow, sparkling like cut sapphires. Those eyes never peered; they penetrated.

We shook hands and talked. Captain de Brassard spoke slowly, with a resonant voice that seemed capable of filling the Champ-de-Mars with a command. Having been raised in England, as I have already said, perhaps he thought in English, but this slowness, which, by the way, was not at all awkward, gave a distinction to what he said, even when he joked, for the captain loved to joke, and his jokes were sometimes rather risqué. Captain de Brassard always went *too far*, as the Comtesse de F—— said, that pretty widow who since her husband's death has worn only three colors — black, violet, and white. He must have been considered very good company, or people would have thought him impossible; but even if he were, anything can be forgiven in the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

One of the advantages of chatting in a carriage is that one can stop when one has nothing more to say, without this being awkward for anybody. In a drawing room that freedom does not exist. Politeness compels you to talk, and one is often punished for this innocent hypocrisy by the hollowness and boredom of the conversation, in which fools, even those born silent (and there are such), do their best to say something and be amiable. In a public carriage everyone is as much at home as at another person's house — and one may without rudeness lapse into silence and allow reverie to follow conversation. Unfortunately, coincidences in life are terribly infrequent, and in times past (for this is already in times past) one rode twenty times in a public carriage — as one may now twenty times in a train — without meeting a man whose conversation was animated and interesting.

Vicomte de Brassard and I talked at first about the accidents en route, the details of the landscape, and memories of the fashionable world in which we had met — then the sun declined, and we both fell into twilight silence. Night, which in autumn seems to fall from the sky so sud-



denly, chilled us, and we rolled ourselves in our coats, resting our heads against the hard corner that is the traveler's pillow.

I do not know whether my companion slept in his corner, but I was wide awake in mine: I had traveled this road so many times and was so used to it that I hardly noticed the objects outside, which disappeared with the movement of the carriage and which seemed to travel through the night in the opposite direction. We passed through several small towns scattered here and there along the long road, which the postilions still called a *ruban de queue* in memory of their own, which had nevertheless been cut off long ago. The night became as black as an extinguished stove; and, in the darkness, the unknown towns through which we passed took on a strange appearance and made us think we were at the world's end. The sorts of sensations that I am noting here, like the memory of these last impressions of a state of things that has disappeared, no longer exist and will return for no one. Nowadays, railways, with their stations at the entrances of towns, no longer allow the traveler to embrace with a rapid glance the vanishing panoramas of their streets, pulled along by galloping horses in a stagecoach that will soon change horses and leave again. In most of these little towns streetlamps, those luxuries, were rare, and we could see less here than on the country roads behind us. There, at least, the sky was wide and the vastness of the space produced a kind of dim light, but here the houses were so close they seemed to kiss each other, their shadows cast upon the narrow streets, the tiny bit of sky and the few stars that one could see between two rows of rooftops, all added to the mystery of these sleeping towns, where the only person we saw was a stable boy with his lantern, at the door of some inn, as he brought out the fresh horses and buckled the straps of their harness, whistling or swearing at some obstinate or skittish horse.

Except for that, and the shout of some traveler awakened from sleep, who lowered the window and called out the eternal question, rendered louder by the silence of the night: "Where are we now, postilion?" no sign of life was heard. Nothing was seen but the carriage full of sleeping people, in a sleeping town, where perhaps some dreamer like myself would try to discern through the pane of his compartment facades of houses blurred by the night, or fix his gaze and thoughts on some window still lit at this late hour, even in those small towns with regular and simple habits, for which the night is devoted to sleep. A human being watching — if only a sentry — when all others are plunged in that drowsiness that is the drowsiness of exhausted animality, is always an imposing sight. But not knowing why someone is watching behind the



closed curtains of a window, where light betokens life and thought, adds the poetry of dreams to the poetry of reality. At least for my part I can never see a window alighted in the night, in a sleeping town through which I am passing, without attaching a world of thoughts to that frame of light, without imagining behind those curtains all kinds of intimacies and dramas. Even now, after all these years, I still think of those windows with their eternal and melancholy light, and I often say to myself, when I see them again in my thoughts:

"What was behind those curtains?"

Well, one of those which has remained longest in my memory (you will know the reason presently) was a window in one of the streets of the town of ———, through which we passed that night. It was in the third house — you see how exact my memory is — beyond the inn at which we changed horses; but I had leisure to examine this window for longer than a mere change of horses would have made necessary. There had just been an accident involving one of the wheels of our coach, and they had to send for and wake up the wheelwright. Now to wake up a wheelwright in a sleeping provincial town, to get him to come and tighten up a nut on a stagecoach that had no competition on that line is no small affair.

In the first place, if the wheelwright was as fast asleep as everybody in our coach, it could not have been easy to wake him. I could hear the snores of the inside passengers from my coupé, and of the outside passengers, who, as you know, have an odd habit of getting off whenever the coach stops, probably — for vanity is found everywhere in France, even on the outside of coaches — to show their agility in getting on again, not one had gotten off.

It is true that the hotel we had stopped in front of was closed. We did not have supper there. We had supped at the last coaching inn. The hotel was sleeping like the rest of us. Nothing betrayed a sign of life. Not a sound disturbed the profound silence — except the weary, monotonous broom wielded by someone (man or woman, we knew not, and it was too dark to ascertain) sweeping out the courtyard of this silent inn, where the carriage entrance was usually left open. Even the broom that straggled across the cobblestone seemed asleep, or devilishly anxious to be. The hotel's facade was as dark as the other houses on the street, where only one window was lit — precisely that window that remains fixed in my memory. The house, in which you could not exactly say that this light shone, for it was screened by a double crimson curtain, through whose thicknesses the light filtered mysteriously, was a large building with only one upper story, but that placed very high.



"How strange!" said Vicomte de Brassard, as though he were talking to himself. "It looks like the same curtain!"

I turned to look at him as though I could have seen him in our dark compartment, but the lamp beneath the coachman's box, intended to light the horses and the road, had just gone out. I thought he was asleep, but he was not, and he had been struck, like me, by the appearance of the window; but he knew more than I, because he knew why it was lit.

Now the tone in which he had said that — though it was a simple remark — was so unlike the voice of the worldly Vicomte de Brassard and astonished me so much that I was overcome by curiosity to see his face, and so I struck a match, as though I had wanted to light my cigar. The bluish flame of the match flared in the darkness.

He was pale — not like a dead man but like Death itself.

Why did he turn pale? This window, with its peculiar appearance, this remark and the pallor of a man who very rarely turned pale, for he was full-blooded, and emotion, when he was moved, turned him scarlet to the crown of his head, the shiver that I felt run down the muscles of his powerful biceps, which I felt against my arm in the close quarters of the compartment — all this gave me the impression that there was something hidden that I, the seeker of stories, might perhaps learn if I went about it properly.

"So you were looking at that window, too, Captain, and even seemed to recognize it," I said in that detached tone that does not seem at all concerned with a reply and is the hypocrisy of curiosity.

"*Parbleu!* I do recognize it," he replied in his rich, deep voice, seeming to dwell on every word.

Calmness had again come over this dandy, the most stolid and majestic of all dandies, who — as you know — scorn all emotions as being beneath them, and do not believe, like that simpleton Goethe, that astonishment can ever be a proper feeling for the human mind.

"I do not come by here often," continued the Vicomte de Brassard quietly; "I even avoid passing by here. But there are some things one never forgets. There are not many, but there are some. I know of three: the first uniform one puts on, the first battle one fights in, the first woman one sleeps with. Well, for me that window is the fourth thing I cannot forget."

He stopped and lowered the window in front of him. Was it to see more clearly the window of which he spoke?

The conductor had gone to find the wheelwright and had not returned. The fresh horses had not yet arrived. Those that had brought us were motionless with fatigue, worn out, not unharnessed, their heads



between their legs, and did not even stamp impatiently on the silent cobblestone in hopes of returning to their stable. Our sleepy stagecoach resembled an enchanted coach, rooted to the spot by a fairy's wand at the crossroads of some clearing in Sleeping Beauty's forest.

"The fact is," I said, "that for any man with imagination, that window has a certain character."

"I don't know what it has for you," replied Vicomte de Brassard, "but I know what it has for me. That is the window of the room in which I lived when I was first in garrison. Confound it! That was thirty-five years ago!

"Behind that curtain — which does not seem to have changed in all those years — and which is now lighted as it was when . . ."

He stopped and left his thought unexpressed, but I was determined to make him speak.

"When you were studying tactics, Captain, staying up all night as a sublieutenant?"

"You give me more than my due," he replied. "I was, it is true, a sublieutenant then, but I did not spend my nights studying tactics, and if my light was burning at an ungodly hour, as respectable people say, it was not to read Marshal de Saxe."

"But," I said — quick as a ball from a racket — "it was perhaps to imitate him."

He returned the ball as promptly.

"Oh," he said, "I was not imitating Marshal de Saxe in the way you mean then. That was not until much later. Then I was but a tyke of a sublieutenant, dashing in my uniform, but awkward and timid with women, though they would never believe it — probably on account of my devil of a face. I never got the full benefit of my timidity from them. Moreover, I was only seventeen in those happy days. I had just gotten out of military school. We got out in those days at the age you enter now, for if the emperor, that terrible consumer of men, had lasted longer, he would have ended up having twelve-year-old soldiers, the way the sultans of Asia have nine-year-old concubines."

"If he goes on talking about the emperor and concubines," I thought to myself, "I shall find out nothing."

"And yet, Vicomte," I replied, "I'd wager you would never have preserved the memory of that window shining up above unless there had been a woman behind the curtain."

"And you would have won your bet, Monsieur," he said, gravely.

"Ah, *parbleu!*" I replied. "I was sure of it. For a man like you, in a little provincial town that you have hardly passed through since you



were first in garrison there, only a siege you withstood, or some woman you took by storm, could make you remember so vividly the window of a house that is now lit in the darkness."

"Yet I did not withstand any siege — at least in the military sense," he replied, still gravely, but gravity was sometimes his way of joking; "and, on the other hand, when one surrenders so quickly, can it be called a siege? But as for taking a woman, by storm or otherwise, I have told you that in those days I was quite incapable of it. So it was not a woman who was taken here — it was I."

I saluted him; did he see it in the dark carriage?

"Berg-op-Zoom was taken," I said.

"And sublieutenants of seventeen," he replied, "are not generally Berg-op-Zooms of impregnable wisdom and self-restraint."

"So," I said gaily, "it was some Madame or Mademoiselle Potiphar."

"It was a demoiselle," he interrupted with a rather comic affability.

"To add to the heap of all the others, Captain. Only in this case the Joseph was a soldier — a Joseph not likely to run away."

"But who certainly did run away, on the contrary," he replied with the greatest composure, "although too late, and very much afraid! Afraid in a way that made me understand what I heard Marshal Ney say with my own ears, and which, coming from such a man, I must admit somewhat comforted me: 'I should like to see the b—— (only he spoke the word in full) who has never been afraid!'

"The story of how you came to feel that sensation would be extremely interesting, Captain."

"*Pardieu!*" he said sharply. "I can, if you are curious, tell you the story of an event that scathed my life as acid scathes steel and that has left a dark stain on my libertine pleasures. Ah, it is not always profitable to be a rake," he added with a melancholy that struck me, coming from this formidable rogue who seemed lined with copper like a Greek brick.

He pulled up the glass he had lowered, as though he feared the sound of his voice might be heard outside, though there was no one near the coach, which was motionless as though abandoned — or else he thought the constant whisk of the broom, dully scraping the cobblestoned courtyard of the hotel, was irksome accompaniment to his story. I listened, attentive to his solitary voice — to the slightest nuances of his voice — for I could not see his face in the dark, closed compartment — my eyes fixed more than ever on the window with the crimson curtain, still illuminated by the same fascinating light about which he was ready to speak.

"I was seventeen," he continued, "and had just finished military school. I had been appointed sublieutenant in an infantry regiment,



which was then impatiently awaiting orders to leave for Germany, where the emperor was conducting that campaign history has named the campaign of 1813. I had just time to kiss my old father in the provinces before joining, in this town, my battalion — for in this little town of some few thousand inhabitants at most, the garrison consisted of only our two first battalions. The two other battalions were in neighboring towns.

“Having only passed through this town, no doubt, while traveling west, you cannot imagine what it is like — or at least what it was like thirty years ago — when you are obliged, as I was then, to live here. It was certainly the worst garrison to which chance — which I believe to be the devil, at that time represented by the minister of war — could have sent me as a starting place for my military career. What an infernally dull hole it was! I do not remember ever having been in a gloomier, more wearisome place. But, at my age, in the initial intoxication of the uniform — a feeling you do not know but that all who have worn it have experienced — I scarcely suffered from what later would seem unbearable.

“After all, how could this dismal provincial town affect me? I lived in it much less than I did in my uniform — a sartorial masterpiece that delighted me. My uniform, of which I was madly fond, hid or embellished everything, and it was the uniform — though this may appear an exaggeration, but it is the truth — that was, strictly speaking, my garrison. When I got too bored by this motionless, joyless, and lifeless town, I put on full uniform, aiguillettes and all, and boredom fled before my high collar. I was like those women who give extra attention to their *toilette* when they are alone and expect no one. I dressed up for myself. I took solitary pleasure in my epaulets and the wriststrap of my saber, gleaming in the sun, as I promenaded deserted streets in the afternoons, with pride, requiring no one's company to be happy, as I have done since in Paris on the Boulevard de Gard where I have heard people say behind me: ‘There is a really fine-looking officer.’

“In the town, which was not rich and had no commerce or activity of any kind, there were only old, almost ruined families who reproached the emperor, because he had not forced the robbers of the Revolution to retribute their ill-gotten gains, as they said, and who for that reason did not celebrate his officers. Therefore there were no parties, or balls, or soirees, or dances. At best there was the promenade on Sunday, after twelve o'clock mass, when mothers came to show off their daughters, if the weather was nice, until two o'clock — then the first bell rang for vespers, and all the petticoats disappeared, and the pathetic promenade was deserted.



"This midday mass, to which we never went, became a military mass during the Restoration; all the officers were obliged to attend it, and it became the only lively event in this dead town. For young bucks like us, who were at a time in life when love and the passion of women occupy such an important place, this military mass was a source of possibility. All the officers, except those on duty, scattered throughout the nave of the church. We almost always contrived to sit behind the prettiest women who came to mass, where they were sure to be looked at, and whom we distracted as much as we could by talking among ourselves, loud enough for them to hear, about their charms or appearance. Ah, that military mass, what romances have I seen begin there! I have seen many love letters slipped into the muffs that girls left on their chairs when they knelt by their mothers' sides — letters to which they brought the reply on the following Sunday, also in their muffs.

"But in the days of the emperor there was no military mass, and consequently no means of approaching the *respectable* girls of this little town where they were but dreams, hidden, veiled, seen from a distance! Nor were there any compensations for this loss. Those establishments, which are never mentioned in good society, were simply horrible. The cafes, where homesickness is drowned during dreadful stretches of spare time, were impossible to enter for anyone who respected his epaulets.

"Nor was there a single hotel — though luxury is now found here, as it is any place — where the officers could dine together without being horribly swindled, so many of us renounced collective life and scattered in various boarding houses, run by bourgeois who were scarcely wealthy and who rented their apartments for as much as they could, thereby adding to their meager tables and scant revenues.

"I lived in a boarding house. One of my comrades had a room at the *Poste aux Chevaux*, which was on this street at that time — there! a few doors down, and if it were daylight, perhaps you could see on the facade the old golden sun emerging from its ceruse background, with the inscription, 'The Rising Sun.' This friend found an apartment for me in his neighborhood — that window up there, which this evening seems to belong to me still, as though it were yesterday! I let him find my lodgings for me. He was older, had been in the regiment longer, and liked guiding me in my inexperience, and insouciance!

"I have already said that except for the uniform — a point I stress, because that is a feeling your generation, with your peace conferences and philosophical and humanitarian tomfoolery, will soon never know — and the hope of hearing the cannon roar in my first battle, in which I would lose my military virginity — pardon the expression — I didn't care



much about anything. I lived only in those two ideas — in the second especially, for it was a hope, and we always care more for what we have not than for that which we have. I lived for tomorrow, like a miser, and I understood the pious who settle on this earth the way one settles in a dangerous place where one will spend the night. No one resembles a monk more than a soldier, and I was a soldier.

"This is how I spent my life. Except during meals, which I took with the people who rented me my apartment and about whom I will tell you presently, and the time devoted daily to military duties and maneuvers, I spent most of my time in my own room, lying on a huge sofa of dark blue morocco leather, which was so cool that it seemed to me like a cold bath after drill, and I scarcely ever left this sofa except to take a fencing lesson or play cards with the neighbor across from me, Louis de Meung, who was less idle than I, for he had picked up, among the *grisettes* of the town, a rather pretty girl, who had become his mistress and who served, as he said, to kill time.

"But what I knew about women did not encourage me to imitate my friend Louis. What little I knew I had picked up where the cadets of Saint-Cyr acquire that information when they are out on leave. Besides, some people blossom late. Did you know Saint-Rémy, one of the greatest rakes of his day, whom we called 'the Minotaur,' not because of his horns — although he had them, for he had killed his wife's lover — but because of his sexual appetite."

"Yes, I knew him," I replied. "But when he was old and incorrigible, and becoming more debauched with each passing year; of course I knew that *rompu*, as Brantôme would have said."

"He was indeed like one of Brantôme's men," replied the vicomte. "Well, at twenty-seven, Saint-Rémy had not yet touched a glass or a petticoat. He will tell you the same thing if you ask him. At twenty-seven, he was, in the matter of women, as innocent as a newborn babe, and though his nurse no longer suckled him, he had never drunk anything but milk or water."

"He certainly made up for lost time!" I remarked.

"Yes," said the vicomte, "and so did I. But I had less difficulty making it up. My initial phase of chastity hardly exceeded the time I spent in this town, and although I was not so absolutely virginal as Saint-Rémy, I lived like a Knight of Malta — and indeed I was one, by birth. Did you know that? I should even have succeeded one of my uncles as a 'master' if the Revolution had not abolished the order, and I have on occasion worn the ribbon, though the order is abolished. A conceit! As for the people who had rented me their apartment," continued Vicomte



de Brassard, "they were, as you may imagine, thoroughly bourgeois. There were only two of them — husband and wife, both old, and not vulgar, on the contrary. In their relations with me, they displayed a politeness that is no longer found these days — especially among their class — and which is like the scent of a bygone era. I was not at an age to observe for observing's sake, and they interested me too little for me to think of penetrating the past of these two old people, whose life I entered in the most superficial way, two hours a day — noon and evening — when I dined or supped with them. Nothing concerning this past transpired in their conversation before me, for this conversation generally turned on persons or matters relating to the town, of which they informed me — the husband with a hint of cheerful scandal mongering and his wife, who was very pious, with more reserve, but certainly with no less pleasure.

"I think, however, I have heard it said that the husband traveled in his youth, for some reason or another, and that when he returned, he married the girl, who had waited for him. They were good, honest people, calm and quiet. The wife spent her life knitting ribbed socks for her husband, and he, being absurdly fond of music, scraped old airs on his violin in a garret over my room. Perhaps they had been better off at one time. Perhaps some loss of fortune (which they concealed) had obliged them to take in a boarder; but, except for that, they showed no sign of poverty. Everything in the house exuded the comfort of houses of yore, filled with fresh-smelling linen, heavy silverware, and apparently immovable furniture, so seldom had it been replaced. I was very comfortable there. The food was good, and I had permission to leave the table as soon as I had 'wiped my beard' — as old Olive, the maid said, though she did me too much honor calling a beard the three cat's whiskers that constituted the mustache of a sublieutenant who was still a growing boy.

"I had been there about six months, living as quietly as my hosts, and I had never heard a single word of the existence of the person I was about to meet at their house, when one day, going down to dinner at the accustomed hour, I saw, in a corner of the dining room, a tall young woman standing on tiptoe, hanging her hat by its ribbons on a hatrack, like someone quite at home who has just come in. Her back was arched as she reached for the peg, which was placed high, and she displayed the superb waist of a dancer. This waist was seized (this is the word, it was laced so tightly!) in the shiny bodice of a green silk spencer with fringes that fell over her white dress, one of those dresses of the time which revealed the shape of the hips.



"With her arms still raised, she turned her head when she heard me enter, and thus I was able to see her face; but she finished what she was doing as though I were not there, making sure the ribbons of her bonnet had not been crumpled in hanging it up; she did all this slowly, carefully, and almost impertinently — for, after all, I was waiting to greet her — before she took any notice of me and did me the honor of looking at me with two very cold, black eyes, which seemed deeper because of the curls amassed on her forehead.

"I could not imagine who this could be at that hour and in that place. No one ever came to dine with my hosts — yet she had certainly come to dine, for the table had been laid, and there were four place settings. But my astonishment to see her there was greatly surpassed by my astonishment to learn who she was, as I did when my hosts entered the room and introduced her as their daughter, who had just finished boarding school and would live with them from now on.

"Their daughter! It was impossible for anyone to be less like the daughter of people like them than this girl! Not that the most beautiful girls in the world cannot be born to all sorts of people. I have known many, haven't you? Physiologically speaking, the ugliest being may produce the most beautiful. But her! There was the chasm of a whole race between her and them! Moreover, physiologically, since I am using that pedantic word, which belongs to your time and not to mine, one would not notice her were it not for her air, which was peculiar in a girl as young as she was, for it was a kind of impassive air and very difficult to describe. She was not the type of whom one said: 'That is a pretty girl,' thinking no more about it than whenever one meets a pretty girl by chance. This air — which distinguished her not only from her parents but from everyone else, for she seemed to have neither their passions nor their feelings — was transfixing. *The Infanta with the Spaniel* by Velázquez, may, if you know the picture, give you an idea of that air, which was neither proud, nor scornful, nor disdainful, but simply impassive; for a proud, scornful, or disdainful air informs people that they exist, since one takes the trouble to scorn or disdain them, while this air said coolly: 'For me, you do not even exist.'

"I admit that her appearance made me ask myself, on that first day and many others, a question that remains unsolved: How could that tall girl have sprung from the stout man in a greenish-yellow coat and white vest, with a face the color of his wife's jam, and a tumor on the back of his fat neck, and a stutter? And if the husband did not trouble me much, for the husband never enters into questions of this sort — the wife seemed just as impossible to explain. Mademoiselle Albertine seemed



the daughter of neither one nor the other (Albertine was the name of this archduchess fallen from heaven into this bourgeois family, as though heaven had wanted to make fun of them); she was called Alberte by her parents, as an abbreviation, but the name suited her face and figure.

"At this first dinner, and those that followed, she appeared to me to be a well-raised young girl with no affectation, habitually silent, who, when she did speak, said clearly and sensibly what she had to say and never exceeded those limits. Besides, if she had had more wit than I knew, she would hardly have found an opportunity to show it at the dinner table. The presence of their daughter necessarily had some effect on the two old people's gossip. All the little scandals about the townsfolk were suppressed. As a matter of course, we never talked about anything more interesting than the rain and nice weather. And so the impassive air of Mademoiselle Albertine, or Alberte, which had struck me so much at first, was all she offered me, and I soon wearied of it. If I had met her in that society for which I was intended, her impassiveness would have aroused my curiosity. But to me she was not a girl I could court — even with the eyes. My position in respect to her — as I was living with her parents — was delicate, and a mere trifle might have upset it. She was neither sufficiently near nor sufficiently remote to be anything in my life, and I soon fell naturally, and quite unintentionally, into the most complete indifference to her impassiveness.

"Nor was this altered either on her part or on mine. There was nothing between us but the coolest politeness and the most sober words. To me she was just an image I scarcely saw — and what was I to her? At the table — this was the only place we met — she looked more at the stopper of the decanter or the sugar bowl than at me. Everything she said was correct, and very well expressed, but insignificant, and gave me no clue to her character. Besides, what did it matter to me? I would have passed my whole life without dreaming of even looking at that quiet and insolent girl, with the out-of-place air of the Infanta, had it not been for a circumstance I will tell you about, which struck me like a thunderbolt — a bolt from the blue!

"One evening, nearly a month after Mademoiselle Alberte had come home, we were sitting down to supper. She was seated next to me, and I paid so little attention to her that I had not yet noticed that she had changed her place and was next to me instead of sitting between her father and mother as usual. I was unfolding my napkin on my knees when — I shall never be able to express this feeling and my astonishment — I felt a hand boldly press mine under the table. I thought I was dreaming — or, rather, I could think of nothing at all. I could only feel



the touch of that hand, boldly seeking mine under the napkin. It was as extraordinary as it was unexpected. All my blood, ignited by that touch, rushed from my heart to my hand, as though drawn to her, and then returned violently, as though driven by a pump, to my heart. Everything swam before my eyes — my ears tingled. I must have turned deadly pale. I thought I was going to faint — that I was going to melt away in the inexpressible pleasure caused by the pressure of that hand — which was rather large and strong, like that of a boy — that had closed upon mine.

"When you are young, you know, pleasure brings with it a sense of dread, and I tried to withdraw my hand, but this wild hand that had seized mine seemed aware of the pleasure it was causing me and kept my hand enveloped in the warmest, most delicious grasp, vanquished like my will... That was thirty-five years ago, and, as you may believe, I have touched many a woman's hand since, but I still feel, when I think of it, the sensation of that hand pressing mine with despotic passion.

"Prey to the thousand tremors which that hand caused to shoot through my whole body, I feared I would betray what I was feeling to the father and mother whose daughter, before their eyes, dared to... Ashamed, however, to seem less of a man than this bold girl who risked her reputation and whose incredible coolness concealed her follies, I bit my lips until they bled, in a superhuman effort to stop the trembling of desire that might have told these poor people so much, and it was then that my eyes sought her other hand, which I had not yet looked at and which at this dangerous moment was calmly turning up the wick of a lamp that had just been placed on the table, for night was beginning to fall. I looked at it. It was the sister of the hand whose touch was thrilling me and sending long tongues of fire as from a furnace through my veins! The hand was rather thick, but the fingers were long and well shaped, and light fell upon the tips, making them transparent and pink, but they never trembled, and they performed the little operation in which they were engaged with firmness, ease, and an incomparable, graceful languor.

"Yet we could not remain like this. We needed our hands to eat with. Mademoiselle Alberte's hand dropped mine, but at the same moment her foot, which was as expressive as her hand, placed itself on mine with the same assurance, the same passion, and the same sovereignty and remained there during this all-too-brief dinner, reminding me of one of those baths that are insufferably hot at the beginning but to which you grow accustomed and end up feeling so good in that you willingly believe that the damned in their cauldron must be as cool and as comfortable as fish in water.



"You may wonder whether I dined that day or if I took much part in the chatter of my worthy hosts, who, in their placidness, did not suspect the mysterious and terrible drama taking place under the table. They saw nothing, but they easily might have, and really I was more worried about them than I was about myself, or her. I had all the decency and compassion of seventeen. I said to myself: 'Is she brazen? Is she mad?' And I looked out of the corner of my eye at her, but she never once lost, during the whole dinner, her air of a princess at a state ceremony, and her face remained as calm as ever, though her foot was saying and doing all the foolish things a foot can say or do — to mine. I must confess I was more surprised at her nerve than at her folly. I had read a good deal of that light literature in which women are not treated considerately. I had been educated at a military school. I considered myself a Lovelace, like every lad who thinks he is good-looking and has kissed his mother's chambermaid on the lips behind the door or on the staircase. But this upset my confidence as a Lovelace of seventeen. This appeared to me worse than anything I had ever heard or read about the deceit of women and how they could conceal their deepest or most violent emotions. To think she was but eighteen! Was she even as much? She had just left a school I had no reason to suspect, considering the morality and the piety of her mother, who had selected it for her daughter. This absence of all embarrassment, this absolute lack of modesty, this perfect control over herself while doing the most imprudent and dangerous things that could be done by a young girl, who had never by a gesture or a glance forewarned the man to whom she made such a monstrous advance — all this rose clearly to my mind, despite the upheaval of my senses.

"But neither then nor later did I stop to philosophize about it. I had no artificial horror for the conduct of this girl, who had shown such terribly precocious depravity. Besides, at the age I was then, or even much later, you do not consider a girl depraved because she throws herself at you. On the contrary, you are almost inclined to regard it as a matter of course, and if you say 'Poor girl,' it is more out of modesty than pity. But though I was shy, I did not want to be taken for a fool — the typical French reason for performing the worst of deeds without remorse. I knew without doubt that what the girl felt for me was not love. Love does not act in that shameless, impudent way; and I also knew well enough that what she had made me feel was not love either. But, love or not — whatever it was, I wanted it. When I rose from the table, my mind was made up. Alberte's hand, which I had not thought of for a moment before it seized mine, had stirred in the



depths of my being a desire to embrace her whole body as her hand had embraced mine!

"I went up to my room like a madman, and when I had calmed a bit by reflection, I asked myself what I should do to seal this alliance — as they say in the country — with a girl who was so devilishly tempting. I was fairly certain — not having made the effort to be entirely certain — that she never left her mother and that the two worked side by side all day in the window seat of the dining room, which also served as their drawing room; that she had no girlfriend who came to see her, and that she hardly ever went out except to mass or vespers on Sunday, with her parents.

"That was not very encouraging, was it? I began to regret that I had not seen more of these good people; for though I had not been aloof with them, I had treated them with that detached and somewhat distracted politeness reserved for people in whom you take only a remote interest; but I thought to myself that I could not very well change my attitude toward them without running the risk of revealing to them, or making them suspect, that which I wished to conceal.

"The only opportunities I had to speak to Mademoiselle Alberte in secret were meetings on the staircase, as I went up or came down from my room — but on the staircase we might be seen and heard. The only possibility, in that small and well-regulated house where everybody was close to everybody else's elbow, was to write; and since the hand of that bold girl knew so well how to find mine under the table, it would perhaps not make much ado about taking a note that was slipped into it; and so I wrote.

"It was a letter suited to the circumstances — supplicatory, urgent, and intoxicated — of a man who has drunk his first draft of happiness and asks for a second.

"Only, in order to give it to her, I had to wait until dinnertime the next day, and that seemed a long time; but at last dinnertime came. The provocative hand, whose touch I had felt for twenty-four hours, did not fail to seek mine under the table as on the previous evening. Mademoiselle Alberte felt my letter and took it, as I foresaw. But what I did not foresee was, that with that defiant air of aloof indifference, she should slip it into her breast, while arranging a bit of lace that was folded over, and perform the act so naturally and so quickly that her mother, who was engaged in serving the soup, saw nothing, and while her old idiot of a father, who was always *humming* something and thinking of his violin when he was not playing, was gazing into the fire."

"Oh, that is done every day, Captain," I interrupted gaily, for his story



seemed to be turning into a sprightly tale of a garrison love affair (I did not suspect what was to follow!). "Why, only a few days ago there was a lady of probably the same sort as your Mademoiselle Alberte at the opera, in the box next to mine. She was more than eighteen, certainly; but, I give you my word of honor, I have rarely seen more majestic modesty in any woman. During the whole performance she sat as motionless as though she had been on a granite pedestal. She did not turn once, either to the right or left, but no doubt saw with her shoulders, which were very bare and very beautiful, for there was in the same box with me, and consequently behind us both, a young man who appeared quite as indifferent as she was to everything but the opera that was being performed. I can certify that this young man had not made one of those grimaces that men make to women in public places and that you may call declarations from afar. But, when the piece was over and amid the general confusion as the boxes emptied, the lady rose and buttoned her cloak, and I heard her say to her husband, in a clear and conjugally imperious voice, 'Henri, pick up my hood!' and then over Henri's back, as he was stooping, she extended her hand and arm and took a note the young man handed her, just as though she had been taking her fan or bouquet from her husband's hand. He rose, the poor man, holding the hood — a scarlet satin hood, but not so scarlet as his face, for which he had, at the risk of apoplexy, dived under the seats as best he could. Upon my word, when I saw that, I went away thinking that, instead of giving it to his wife, he ought to have kept that hood to hide his own head in, for the horns were about to sprout."

"Your story is a good one," said Vicomte de Brassard rather coolly — perhaps he would have enjoyed it more at another time — "but allow me to finish mine. I confess that with a girl of that sort I did not for a moment doubt the fate of my letter. She may have been tied to her mother's apron strings, but she would find a way to read and reply to my letter. I even expected a long correspondence, carried on under the table as we had begun, and when the next day I entered the dining room, firmly convinced that I was about to have a reply to my letter of the previous evening, I thought I was seeing things when I saw that the place settings had been changed and that Mademoiselle Alberte was seated where she always ought to have been, between her father and mother.

"Why this change? Did her father and mother suspect something? Mademoiselle Alberte was across from me, and I stared at her intently, wanting to be understood. There were twenty-five question marks in my eyes; but hers were as calm, as blank, as indifferent as usual. They



looked at me as though they did not see me. I have never seen a look more annoying than that long, calm gaze, which fell on you as though you were an inanimate object. I boiled with curiosity, vexation, impatience, and many other agitated and disappointed feelings — and I could not understand how this girl, who was so sure of herself that it seemed instead of nerves she had, beneath her smooth skin, as many muscles as I, did not dare give me a sign that would warn me, or make me think, or tell me, that we understood each other and that we were accomplices in the same mystery, whether it was love or something else.

"I had to ask myself if this was really the same girl who had touched my hand and foot under the table; who had taken the letter the previous evening and had slipped it so cleverly into her breast, in front of her parents, as though she were placing a flower there. She had done so much already that she need not have been embarrassed to give me a glance. But no! I had nothing. The whole dinner went by without that glance I was watching and waiting for. 'She must have found some means to reply to me,' I said to myself as I left the table and went up to my room, not believing that such a woman would retreat after such an incredible advance, not admitting that fear or prudence could stand between her and her fancies, and *parbleu!* that I was not one of them!

"If her parents do not suspect anything,' I said to myself, 'if it is by chance that she has changed her place at the table, tomorrow I shall find her by my side again.' But the next day, and the following days, I was not seated near Mademoiselle Alberte, who continued to wear the same incomprehensible expression and to say the same ordinary phrases in the same impassive way.

"You may well imagine that I observed her with much interest. She seemed as undisturbed as possible, while I was horribly upset, upset to the point of anger — an anger that was tearing me in two and that I was forced to conceal! And that air, which she never lost, distanced us far more than the table between us. I was so violently exasperated that in the end I did not fear compromising her by looking at her, by fixing on her impenetrable, icy gaze the menacing, burning weight of mine. Was this a clever maneuver on her part? Was it coquetry? Was it but one caprice following another — or simply stupidity? I have known women since who at first are all sensual upheaval and then all stupidity! 'If one knew the right moment!' as Ninon used to say. Had the right moment already passed?

"Yet I still waited — for what? — a word, a sign — something said in a low voice amid the noise of our chairs as we rose from dinner — and as



that did not come, I seized upon the most foolish and absurd ideas. I imagined that because of the difficulties that surrounded us in the house, she would write to me by post — she was quite cunning enough to slip a letter into the box when she was out with her mother — and gripped by that idea, my blood boiled twice a day, an hour before the postman passed. Ten times a day I asked the old servant, in a voice choked with emotion: 'Are there any letters for me, Olive?' To which she replied imperturbably: 'No, Sir, there are not.'

"Finally the vexation grew too acute. Desire deceived turned to hatred. I began to hate Alberte, and to explain her conduct toward me by motives that would cause me to despise her, for hatred needs scorn. Scorn is hatred's nectar! 'Cowardly hussy, she is afraid to write,' I said to myself. You see, I had resorted to foul language. I insulted her in my thoughts, not thinking it slander. I even endeavored not to think of her, and I heaped abuse upon her when I spoke of her, to Louis de Meung — for I did tell him about her, she had extinguished all my sense of chivalry — and I related the whole adventure to my friend, who twisted his long blond mustache while he listened to me, and replied frankly — for we were not moralists in the Twenty-Seventh:

"Do as I do. One nail drives out another. Take one of the little seamstresses of the town for a mistress and think no more about that cursed girl.'

"But I did not follow his advice. I was too embroiled. If she knew I had taken a mistress, it might have aroused her vanity or her jealousy. But she would not know. How could she? If I had brought a mistress to my room, as Louis did, I would have upset the worthy people of the house, who would have immediately asked me to look for other lodgings, and I was not willing to give up the chance, if this was all I had, of again meeting the hand or the foot of that confounded Alberte, who, after all she had dared to do, still remained 'Miss Impassive.'

"Call her, instead, impossible,' said Louis, teasing me.

"A whole month passed, and despite my resolve to forget Alberte and to seem as indifferent as she was — to fight marble with marble and coldness with coldness — I spent my life lying in wait — which I detest, even when I am hunting. Yes sir, my days were a perpetual lying in wait. I was lying in wait when I went down to dinner and hoped to find her alone in the dining room, as on the first occasion. Lying in wait during dinner, when she met my eyes with an infernally calm, clear gaze that neither avoided mine, nor replied to it. Lying in wait after dinner, for I stayed a while to see the two women resume their work in the window seat, hoping she would drop something — her thimble, or scissors,



or a piece of cloth — that I could pick up, and in giving it back to her touch her hand — that hand which was all I could think of! Lying in wait when I had gone back to my room, thinking I heard in the corridor the foot that had pressed so brazenly on mine. Lying in wait on the staircase, where I hoped I might meet her, and where old Olive discovered me one day, to my great embarrassment. Lying in wait at my window — the window you see — where I planted myself when she was going out with her mother and from which I did not budge until she returned, but which was as useless as all the rest. When she went out wrapped in a shawl — a shawl with red and white stripes and black and yellow flowers (I've forgotten nothing!) — she never once turned her insolent torso; and when she returned, still by her mother's side, she never raised her head or her eyes to the window where I was awaiting her.

"Such were the miserable practices to which she had condemned me. Of course I know that women make us wait on them — but not to that extent. The old conceitedness that should be dead in me by now still revolts at the thought of it! I no longer took pleasure in my uniform! When the day's duties were over — after the drill or the parade — I returned home quickly, but not to read a pile of memoirs or novels, my sole reading at that time. I no longer went to see Louis de Meung. I no longer touched the foils. I did not even have the resource of tobacco, which deadens the nerves while it devours you, which you young people now have. We did not smoke then in the Twenty-Seventh, or only the privates did in the guard room, when they played cards on top of a drum. I remained listless, with something gnawing at me — I don't know if it was my heart — on the sofa, which no longer felt cool and pleasant in my six square feet of room, where I grew restless, like a caged lion cub when it smells raw meat.

"And if it were so during the day, it was also the same for a great part of the night. I went to bed late. I no longer slept. That infernal Alberte kept me awake. She had kindled a fire in my veins, and then had gone away, like an arsonist who does not even turn his head to see the flames blazing behind him. In the evening, I lowered that same crimson curtain" — here the vicomte passed his glove over the coach window, to wipe away the condensation — "because there were no shutters, just as there are none now, to prevent inquisitive neighbors (always more inquisitive in the provinces than elsewhere) from peering into my room.

"The room was furnished in Empire style — the style of the period — with a parquet floor, no carpet, and bronze on all the cherry wood: bronze sphinx heads at each corner of the bed and bronze lion's paws at



its feet, bronze lion's heads on all the drawers of the bureau and writing desk, brass rings hanging from their greenish mouths to pull the drawers open. A square table, in a lighter cherry wood with a gray marble top and copper-wire mesh, stood across from the bed against the wall, between the window and the door of a large dressing room; and opposite the fireplace was the large blue morocco sofa of which I have already spoken. In each corner of this high-ceilinged room was a faux Chinese lacquer cupboard, and on one of them stood, mysterious and white in the dark corner, a statuette of Niobe (after the ancient sculpture) — which was surprising in this common bourgeois home. But wasn't the incomprehensible Alberte much more surprising? The walls, wainscoted and painted a yellowish white, had neither pictures nor engravings. I hung my weapons there from gilt copper hooks. When I rented this great calabash of an apartment — as Louis de Meung, who did not poeticize things, elegantly put it — I had placed in the center a large round table, which I covered with military maps, books, and papers. It was my desk, and I wrote there whenever I did write.

"Well, one evening, or rather one night, I had pushed the sofa up to this large table, and I was drawing by the light of the lamp — not to distract me from the sole thought that had been consuming me for a month, but to plunge deeper into it, for it was the enigmatic Alberte I was sketching — it was the face of that she-devil, by whom I was possessed the way the pious say one can be by the devil.

"It was late. The street — through which two coaches passed every night, in opposite directions (as now), one at a quarter to one in the morning and the other at half past two, both of which stopped to change horses at the Hôtel de la Poste — the street was as silent as the bottom of a well. I could have heard a fly, but if by chance there was one in my room, it must have been asleep in a corner of the windowpane, or in one of the pleats of the curtain, which was of heavy twilled silk fabric and which I had taken from its peg, so that it hung before the window, stiff and motionless. The only noise was the one I myself made with my pencil and smudger.

"Yes, it was her face I was drawing: God knows with what care and passionate attention! Suddenly, without any sound from the lock to forewarn me, my door opened a little way, creaking as doors do when the hinges are dry, and remained ajar, as though frightened by its own sound. I raised my eyes, thinking I had not closed the door properly since it was opening in this unexpected way with a plaintive creak that was loud enough to frighten those who were awake and wake those who were asleep. I rose from the table to close it, but the half-opened door opened



still wider, and still very gently, but with a repetition of that shrill sound that echoed like a wail through the silent house, and I saw, when it had opened fully — Alberte!

“Alberte, who despite all her precautions, her immense fear, could not prevent that cursed door from crying out.

“Ah, *tonnerre de Dieu!* They talk about visions — but the most supernatural vision would not have surprised me, or made my heart bound and palpitate as wildly as it did when I saw — from this open door — Alberte coming toward me, startled by the noise the door had made in opening and would make again if she closed it. Remember that I was but seventeen! Perhaps she saw my terror, and her own, and repressed by a quick sign the cry of surprise that might have escaped me — and certainly would have escaped but for this gesture — then she closed the door, not slowly but rapidly, to prevent the hinges from squeaking, but they nonetheless gave one short shrill cry. The door being closed, she listened with her ear against it, if another sound more terrible might not reply to that of the door. I thought I saw her totter. I sprang toward her, and she was soon in my arms.”

“She seems to be getting along nicely, your Alberte,” I said to the captain.

“You think, perhaps,” he continued, as though he had not heard my jesting remark, “that she fell into my arms from fear, or passion, that she had lost her head — like a girl who is pursued, or may be pursued; who does not know what she is doing when she does the craziest things but abandons herself to that devil which is in every woman (so they say) which would always be her master, were it not for the two others also in her — Cowardice and Shame — to interfere with the first. Well, no, it was not like that! If you think so, you are wrong. She had no vulgar and shame-faced fears. It was rather she who took me in her arms than I who took her in mine. Her first movement had been to throw her head on my chest, but she raised it again and looked at me with her great eyes — enormous eyes! — as if to see whether it were really I she held in her arms.

“She was horribly pale — paler than I had ever seen her — but she had not lost that look of a princess. Her features were still as immobile and unimpressionable as a medal. Only on the slightly pouting lips hovered an expression of distraction that was not passion satisfied, or soon to be satisfied! There was something so dark about this, that, in order not to see it, I impressed on her beautiful red and full lips a robust kiss of triumphant desire! The mouth was half open, but the dark eyes, whose long lashes almost touched mine, did not close — or



even flutter — but behind them, as upon her mouth, I saw the same expression of madness.

“As she clung to me in a burning kiss, as though transported by the lips that penetrated hers, I carried her to the blue morocco sofa — which had been St. Laurence’s grill to me during the month that I had rolled on it thinking of her — and the leather was crushed voluptuously under her bare back, for she was half naked. She had come from her bed and — would you believe it? — had passed through the room where her father and mother slept! She had crept, groping, with her hands in front of her, in order not to knock against some piece of furniture and so make a noise that would wake them up.”

“Ah!” I said, “one is not braver than that in the trenches. She was worthy to be a soldier’s mistress.”

“And that she was, from that night on,” replied the vicomte.

“She was as violent as I was, and I can swear that I was. But, in spite of that, there was a drawback. Neither she nor I could forget, in our most delicious transports, our dreadful situation. Amid the happiness she came to seek and to offer me, she was as though stupefied by the act she had nevertheless accomplished with such a firm will and such stubborn obstinacy. I was not surprised. I was stupefied myself! I had — though I did not tell her or show it — a most terrible anxiety in my heart, while she pressed me closely to her own. I listened through her sighs and kisses and through the terrifying silence that lay on that sleeping and trusting household, for something terrible — for the mother who did not awake, for the father who did not get out of bed! And I looked over her shoulder to see if the door — from which she had removed the key out of fear of the noise it might make — would not open again and show me the Medusa heads, pale and indignant, of the two old people whom we were deceiving so boldly and so shamefully — pictures of violated hospitality and justice!

“Even the voluptuous creaking of the blue sofa, though it sounded the trumpets of Love, made me tremble dreadfully. My heart beat against hers, which seemed to reverberate against mine. It was simultaneously intoxicating and sobering; but it was terrible. Later I did not so much mind. By dint of repeating this incredible imprudence, it ceased to disturb me. I grew accustomed to the danger of being surprised. I no longer thought about it. I thought only of being happy. From this first wonderful night on, she decided she would come to me every other night — since I could not go to her, her room having only one door, which led to the room of her parents — and she came every second night, but she never lost the sensation — the stupor — of the first night! Time



did not have the effect on her it did on me. She was never inured to the risk she ran each time. She always lay on my breast, hardly speaking — for, as you may suppose, she was not a great talker — and when later on I grew calmer, seeing the danger always avoided, and spoke to her, as a man speaks to his mistress, of what had already passed between us — of that inexplicable, insane coldness that had followed her bold step; when I asked her all those endless questions put by a lover, and which are, after all, nothing but curiosity, her only reply was a long embrace. Her sad mouth remained silent — in all but kisses.

“There are women who tell you: ‘I have ruined myself for you’; and there are others who say: ‘How you must despise me!’ They are different ways of expressing the fatality of love — but she, no! She said nothing! A strange thing! A still stranger personality! She gave me the idea of a thick, hard marble slab that had a fire burning beneath it. I believed there would come a moment when the marble would be cracked by the heat, but it remained as solid as ever. Night after night saw no change in her, and, if I may be permitted an ecclesiastical expression, she was always as ‘difficult to confess’ as she had been the first night. I could get nothing out of her. At the most a monosyllable, wrung from those beautiful lips, which I doted on all the more because I had seen them cold and indifferent during the day, and this monosyllable did not give me much insight into the character of a girl who appeared to be more of a sphinx than all the others that adorned the Empire furniture.”

“But, Captain,” I interrupted, “there must have been an end to all this. You are a sensible man, and sphinxes are fabulous creatures. You must at last have found out what the devil had got into the girl.”

“An end! Yes, there was an end,” said Vicomte de Brassard, suddenly lowering the coach window, as though the breath had failed in his huge chest and he needed air before he could go on. “But what this singular girl had up her sleeve was not discovered, after all. Our love, our relations, our intrigue — call it what you will — gave us, or rather gave *me*, sensations I do not think I have ever experienced since with women I loved more than Alberte, who, perhaps, did not love me and whom, perhaps, I did not love! I never fully understood what I was to her and what she was to me — and this lasted more than six months. During these six months, all I understood was a kind happiness of which you have not an idea when you are young. I understood the happiness of those who have something to hide. I understood the enjoyment of complicity in mystery, which, even without the hope of success, is the delight of conspirators. Alberte, at her parents’ table and elsewhere,



was still always the 'Infanta' who had made such an impression on me the first time I saw her. Her Neroesque face, beneath the hard curls of the blue-black hair that touched her eyebrows, told nothing of the guilty nights, showed no blush.

"I tried to be as impenetrable as she was, but I am sure I would have betrayed myself ten times had I been well observed. I flattered myself proudly, and almost sensually, at the bottom of my heart, that all this superb indifference was for me, and that she felt for me all the baseness of passion — if passion can ever be base. No one but ourselves knew that; the thought was delicious. No one — not even my friend Louis de Meung, with whom I had been discreet since I had become happy! He had guessed all, no doubt, but then he was as discreet as I was. He did not question me. I had, with no effort, resumed my friendly habits with him, the walks on the promenade, in full uniform or undress, cards, fencing, and punch! *Pardieu!* When you know happiness will come in the shape of a pretty girl, whose senses are aflame, and visit you regularly every other night at the same hour, that simplifies your existence wonderfully!"

"But the parents of Alberte must have slept like the Seven Sleepers!" I said jokingly, cutting short the reflection of the old dandy by a jest, so as not to appear overly interested in his story, though it did interest me; for with dandies a joke is the only way of making yourself respected.

"You imagine, then, I am being romantic and exaggerating the effects?" said the vicomte. "But I am not a novelist. Sometimes Alberte did not come. The door — the hinges of which were oiled now and went as soft as wool — sometimes did not open all night — because her mother had heard her and cried out or her father had seen her creeping on tip-toe across the room. But Alberte, having a head like iron, always had a pretext ready. She was ill. She was seeking the sugar bowl, and without a light, in order not to awake anyone."

"Those heads of iron are not so rare as you seem to think, Captain," I interrupted again. "Your Alberte, after all, was no cleverer than the girl who received every night, in her grandmother's room — while the old lady was asleep behind the curtains — a lover, who came in through the window, and, as they had no blue sofa, they calmly lay on the carpet. You know the story as well as I do. One night, a sigh louder than usual woke the grandmother, who cried from behind the curtains: 'What is the matter, little one?' and the girl nearly fainted on her lover's breast, but nevertheless recovered herself, and replied: 'My corset hurt me while I was looking for a needle that has fallen to the floor and that I cannot find.'"



"Yes, I know the story," replied the Vicomte de Brassard, whom I believe I insulted by comparing Alberte to someone else. "If I remember correctly, the young girl was a de Guise. She lived up to her name, but you do not mention that after that night she never opened her window again to her lover, who was, I think, Monsieur de Noirmoutier; whereas Alberte came to me the day after these terrible complications and exposed herself again to danger just as though nothing were the matter. I was then only a sublieutenant and not very strong in mathematics, with which I did not trouble myself; but it must have been evident to one who could calculate probabilities that some day — or night — there would be a *dénouement*."

"Ah, yes," I remarked, remembering what he had said before he began his story, "the *dénouement* acquainted you with the sensation of fear, Captain."

"Precisely," he replied, in a voice so grave that it contrasted sharply with the flippant tone I had assumed. "You have seen, have you not? that from the time she seized my hand under the table, to the moment she appeared in the night like an apparition framed in my open doorway, Alberte had spared me no emotion. She had caused to pass through me more than one kind of shudder, more than one kind of terror; but they had been merely like bullets whistling around you — like cannonballs of which you feel only the wind: you shudder, but you go on. Well, it was not that. It was fear — thorough and complete fear, and no longer for Alberte, but for myself, for myself alone. What I felt was that sensation which makes the heart as pale as the face — that panic which makes whole regiments take to flight. I have seen the whole Chamboran regiment flee at full gallop, with its terrified colonel and officers. But at that time I had seen nothing yet, and I learned something I believed to be impossible.

"Listen . . . It was night. With the life we were leading, it was bound to be at night — a long winter's night. I will not say it was one of our calmest nights. Our nights were all calm. We were so happy that they became so. We slept on a loaded cannon. We were not disturbed at the thought of making love on the blade of a saber over an abyss, like the bridge that leads to the Turkish hell. Alberte had come earlier than usual, in order to stay longer. When she came, my first caress, my first act of love, was for her feet — her pretty feet, no longer encased in green or hydrangea-blue slippers, but bare so as to make no sound and ice-cold from walking over the stone floor of the corridor leading from her parents' room to mine, which was at the other side of the house.

"I warmed those icy feet, which for my sake had come out of a warm



bed, and perhaps would cause her to catch some terrible disease of the lungs. I knew how to warm them and return the pink and rosy color to those pale, cold feet; but that night my method failed. My mouth was powerless to bring to the lovely arch of her foot the flush of blood, like a poppy-colored ribbon, which I loved to place there.

"Alberte was more silent that night in passion than ever.

"Her embraces had that languor and force that were to me like a language, a language so expressive that, though I told her of my sheer madness and intoxication, I no longer asked her to speak to me of hers. I understood those embraces.

"But suddenly I felt them no longer. Her arms ceased to press me to her breast. I thought it was one of those swoons she often had, though generally in these swoons her embrace never relaxed. I need not be prudish with you. We are both men, and we can speak as men.

"I had experienced the voluptuous spasms of Alberte, and when they seized her, they did not interrupt my embraces. I remained as I was, on her breast, waiting for her to regain consciousness, in the proud certainty that she would recover her senses with the heightening of mine and that the lightning that had struck her, by striking again, would revive her.

"But this was the exception to the rule. I gazed at her as she lay close to me on the blue sofa, awaiting the moment when her eyes, now hidden under her lids, would again reveal to me those splendid orbs of black velvet and fire; when those teeth, clenched tightly enough to break the enamel at the slightest kiss applied quickly to her neck or trailed slowly along her shoulders, would part and release a sigh. But her eyes did not reopen, and her teeth did not unclench.

"The icy chill of Alberte's feet had risen to her lips beneath mine. When I felt that horrible cold, I sat up to look at her better; with a bound I tore myself from her arms, one of which fell back onto her body, and the other dropped to the ground by the side of the sofa on which she lay. Frightened, but still having my senses about me, I put my hand on her heart. No sign of life! No sign in the pulse, in the temples, in the carotid arteries, no sign anywhere. There was nothing but death, with its terrible rigidity!

"I was sure of her death — and yet I did not want to believe it.

"The human mind is sometimes foolishly resolved against the clarity of evidence and destiny. Alberte was dead. Of what? I did not know. I was not a doctor. But she was dead, and though I saw with the clarity of the noonday sun that anything I could do would be useless, I did everything I knew would be desperately useless. In my absolute void



of knowledge and lack of instruments and resources, I emptied over her forehead all the bottles on my dressing table. I slapped her hands, in spite of the noise it made in a house where the slightest sound made us tremble. I had heard one of my uncles, a captain in the fourth dragoons, say that he had once saved one of his friends from apoplexy by bleeding him with a fleam such as that used for bleeding horses. I had plenty of weapons in my room. I picked up a dagger and cut Alberte's arm deeply. I massacred this splendid arm, but no blood flowed.

"At the most a few drops coagulated. Neither kisses nor sucking nor bites could galvanize into life that stiff corpse, which had become a corpse beneath my lips. Not knowing what else to do, I stretched out on her body — the means employed (according to legend) by the thaumaturges of the past when they resuscitated dead bodies — not hoping to restore her to life, but acting as though I did so hope. And it was while lying on this cold body that a thought suddenly occurred to me, which had not emerged before from the chaos in which the frightfully sudden death of Alberte had thrown me, and I was afraid.

"Oh, I was seized by dread — terrible dread. Alberte had died in my room, and her death would reveal everything. What would become of me? What should I do?

"At the thought, I felt the hideous hand of fear, and my hair stood on end. My backbone turned to ice, and I tried to struggle — but in vain — against the cowardice. I told myself I must be calm; that I was a man, after all — a soldier. I took my head in my hands, and when my brain reeled, I compelled myself to think of the horrible situation in which I was caught and consider all the ideas that whipped my brain like a cruel top — and all these ideas centered in the inanimate body of Alberte, and how her mother would find her in the morning in 'the officer's room' — dead and dishonored!

"The thought of the mother whose daughter I had dishonored and perhaps killed weighed more on my mind even than Alberte's corpse. The death could not be concealed; but was there no way to conceal the dishonor proved by the discovery of the body in my room? That was the question I asked myself, the point on which I fixed all my attention.

"The more I studied it, the more difficult it seemed, until it assumed the proportions of an absolute impossibility. Frightful hallucination! Sometimes Alberte's corpse seemed to fill my entire room. Ah, if her bedroom had not been behind that of her parents, I would have carried her back, at all risks, to her own bed.

"But could I do what she had done, so imprudently, when she was



alive, and risk passing through a room with which I was unacquainted, and which I had never entered, and where the father and mother of the unfortunate girl slumbered in the light sleep of old people?

"Yet such was my state of mind, and my fear of the next day and of the dead body in my room galloped so furiously through my brain, that this temerity, this folly of carrying Alberte to her own room possessed me as the only way to save the poor girl's honor, and to spare me the shame of the reproaches of the father and mother and pull me out of this ignominy. Would you believe it? I can hardly believe it myself when I think of it! I had the strength to take Alberte's dead body, and, raising it by the arms, place it on my shoulders. Horrible burden! Heavier by far than that of the damned in Dante's inferno. You had to have carried, as I did, that bundle of flesh which but an hour before had made my blood boil with desire and which now terrified me! You had to have carried it yourself to know what I felt and suffered.

"Thus laden, I opened the door, and, like her, with bare feet to make less noise, I went out into the corridor that led to her parents' room at the end of the hallway, stopping at each step, my legs almost giving way under me, to listen for the silence of the night, which I could no longer hear because of the beating of my own heart. The moments seemed terribly long. Nothing moved. One step succeeded another. But when I arrived in front of that terrible door to her parents' bedroom, which I had to enter and which she had not quite closed, so that she might find it still open on her return — and when I heard the long, quiet breathing of those two poor old people sleeping in such peace and confidence, I dared go no farther. I dared not pass that threshold, so black and gaping in the darkness.

"I drew back; I almost fled with my burden. I returned to my room more and more terror-struck. I replaced Alberte's body on the sofa, and, on my knees beside her, I repeated those supplicating questions. What should I do? What will become of me? So perturbed was I, that the senseless and atrocious idea occurred to me to throw the body of this beautiful girl, who had been my mistress for six months, out the window. Despise me if you will! I opened the window — I drew aside the curtain you see there, and I looked into the black hole at the bottom of which was the street, for it was very dark that night. I could not see the cobblestones. 'They will believe it is a suicide,' I said to myself — and I once more lifted Alberte's body. But then a flash of common sense shot across my madness. 'How was she killed? Whence could she have fallen if she is found under my window?'

"I was struck by the impossibility of what I wanted to do. I closed



the window, which creaked in its catch. I drew the curtain again, frightened to death by each sound I made. Besides, whether I threw the body out the window or left it on the staircase or in the corridor, whatever I did, the body would be an eternal accuser — desecration would be useless. An examination of the corpse would reveal everything, and a mother's eyes would see all that the doctor or the judge tried to conceal from her.

"What I suffered was unbearable, and the idea of ending it all with a pistol shot crossed my mind in my 'demoralized' state (an expression of the emperor's I only later understood!) as I looked at my weapons shining on the walls. But I'll be frank. I was seventeen, and I loved my sword. Both by inclination and breeding, I was a soldier. I had never seen battle, and I wished to. I had military ambitions. In the regiment we joked about Werther — regarded as a hero at that time but whom we officers pitied. The thought prevented me from escaping by killing myself, the ignoble fear that oppressed me, and led to another that seemed to be salvation itself in the straits in which I writhed.

"What if I went and saw the colonel!" I said to myself. The colonel is the father of the regiment — and I dressed myself as though the call to arms were beating for a surprise attack. I took my pistols as a precaution. Who knew what might happen? I embraced for the last time, with all the affection of seventeen — one is always sentimental at seventeen — the silent mouth of the beautiful, trespassed Alberte, which during the last six months had showered me with the most intoxicating favors. I descended the stairs on tiptoe, leaving death in this house. Breathless as one fleeing for his life, I spent an hour (it seemed an hour) unbolting the door and turning the key in its enormous lock, and having closed the door again with all the precautions of a thief, I ran desperately to the colonel's house.

"I rang as though the house was on fire. I shouted as though the enemy was about to capture the flag of the regiment. I knocked everything over, including the orderly who tried to prevent me from entering his master's room at this hour, and once the colonel was awake, I told him everything. I confessed all at once, rapidly and boldly, for time pressed, and I begged him to save me.

"The colonel was a man of action. He saw at a glance the horrible abyss I was falling into. He had pity on the youngest of his children, as he called me, and indeed I was in a condition to be pitied. He told me with a curse that I must begin by leaving town, immediately, and that he would see to the rest; that he would see the parents as soon as I had gone, but that I must go at once, and take the stagecoach, which would



stop in ten minutes at the Hôtel de la Poste, to a town he named, where he would write. He gave me some money, for I had forgotten to take some, pressed his old gray mustache to my cheeks, and ten minutes after this interview I had climbed onto the roof of the stagecoach — it was the only place left — that was making the same journey as we are now, and I passed at a gallop under the window (you may guess how I looked at it) of the funereal chamber where I had left Alberte dead, and which was lighted up as it is tonight.”

Vicomte de Brassard stopped, his voice quite broken. I no longer felt the inclination to joke. The silence did not last long.

“And after?” I said.

“Well,” he replied, “there was no after. This is what tormented me for so long. I followed the colonel’s instructions faithfully. I impatiently awaited a letter that would inform me of what had happened after my departure. I waited about a month; but at the end of the month it was not a letter from the colonel I received, for he scarcely ever wrote, except with his sword on the faces of his enemies, but an order to change regiments. I had been appointed to the Thirty-Fifth Regiment, which was going to battle in twenty-four hours. It was my first battle, and it distracted me. The battles in which I took part, the hardships, and also some adventures with women caused me to neglect to write to the colonel and turned my thoughts from the sad memory of Alberte, without, however, erasing it. I preserved it still, like a bullet that cannot be extracted. I said to myself that I should someday meet the colonel, who would inform me of what I wished to know, but the colonel was killed at the head of his regiment at Leipsic. Louis de Meung had also been killed about a month before.

“It is contemptible, no doubt,” added the captain, “but everything gets numbed in even the most robust souls, perhaps because they are robust. The devouring curiosity to know what had happened after my departure no longer disturbed me. I could have come back years later to this little town — changed as I was, I would never have been recognized — and found out what had filtered through of my tragic adventure. But something, certainly not respect for public opinion, which I have all my life despised, something resembling the fear that I did not wish to feel a second time, always restrained me.”

He fell silent again, this dandy who had related without any dandyism such a grim and true story. I was contemplating his story, and I understood that the brilliant Vicomte de Brassard, this fine flower of dandyism, this drinker of claret, had other sides to his character than those that appeared to his acquaintances. I remembered that he had



said at the beginning that there was a black stain that had destroyed his pleasures as a libertine for life — when suddenly he astonished me still more by seizing my arm.

"Look!" he said. "Look at the curtain!"

The slim shadow of a woman was outlined against it.

"Alberte's shadow!" said the captain. "Fate is mocking us tonight," he added bitterly.

The curtain was once again empty, red, and luminous. The wheelwright, who had been tightening a screw while the captain was speaking, had finished his task. The fresh horses were ready and were pawing the ground, striking out sparks with their iron shoes.

The driver, his astrakhan cap over his ears and the logbook between his teeth, took the reins and climbed to the box, and, once in his seat, cried in a loud clear voice:

"Go on!"

And we went on, and soon passed the mysterious window with its crimson curtain that I still see in my dreams.

## THE GREATEST LOVE OF DON JUAN

*The devil's primest fare is innocence.*

— Anonymous

### I

"HE IS STILL alive, then, that old reprobate?"

"Still alive! Good God! Yes — by God's grace," I took care to add, remembering Madame's piety, and that she belonged to Saint-Clotilde, the most distinguished and aristocratic parish — "'*Le roi est mort! Vive le roi!*'" is what they used to say under the old monarchy, before that fine old piece of Sèvres porcelain broke. But Don Juan, in spite of all democracies, is a monarch who will never break."

"Yes, the devil is immortal!" she returned in a self-approving tone.

"As a matter of fact, he..."

"Who? The devil?"

"No, Don Juan. He dined lavishly only three days ago. Guess where."

"At your horrid Maison d'Or, no doubt."

"My dear Madame! Don Juan *never* goes there now. They have nothing suitable there for His Highness's palate. Señor Don Juan has always been a bit like Arnand de Brescia's famous monk who, the Chronicles



tell us, lived only on the blood of souls. That is what he loves to color his champagne with, and it's been a long time since there was any blood in that tavern of tarts!"

"You'll be telling me next," she interrupted ironically, "that he supped at the Benedictine nunnery with the ladies."

"Yes! The ladies of Perpetual Adoration; why, certainly, Madame. For indeed I do think the adoration this devil of a man once inspired seems to last forever."

"And I think that for a Catholic you are profane" — this she said slowly, but not without a touch of irritation — "and I must beg you to spare me the details of your naughty suppers. I suppose this is a new way of telling me what you've been up to, this harping on Don Juan tonight."

"I merely state the facts, Madame. The strumpets at the supper in question, if they *are* strumpets, are not *my* friends at all, unfortunately."

"Enough! Enough!"

"Forgive my modest disclaimer. They were..."

"The *mille è trè*?" she asked curiously, thinking better of it and brightening.

"Oh! not all of them. Only a dozen. With as many as that, nothing could be more respectable, you know."

"Or more disreputable," she quipped.

"Besides, you know as well as I do the Comtesse de Chiffrevas's boudoir will not hold a crowd. Great things have been done there, but the room is small."

"What!" she cried in astonishment. "They had supper in the boudoir?"

"Yes, Madame, in the boudoir. And why not? People have dined on battlefields. They wished to give a very special and particular supper to Señor Don Juan, and it seemed more worthy of his exploits to give it on the scene of his former triumphs, where fond memories bloom instead of orange trees. A pretty notion, at once tender and sad! This was not a *victims' ball*! It was a victims' dinner!"

"And Don Juan?" she asked, as Orgon, in the play, asks: "And Tartufe?"

"Don Juan took it well and supped well,

*He, he alone before them all,*

as the poet sings — in the person of someone you know very well indeed — none other than the Comte Jules-Amédée-Hector de Ravila de Ravilès."

"Comte de Ravilès! Why, yes! He was a Don Juan."



And the pious lady, hardened in her bigotry and long past the age of daydreams, lapsed then and there into a fond reverie of which Comte Jules-Amédée-Hector was the theme — that man of the old Don Juan breed, to which God has not indeed given “all the world and the glory thereof” but has suffered the devil to do it for Him.

## II

What I had just told the aged Marquise Guy de Ruy was the unvarnished truth. Hardly three days had elapsed since a dozen ladies of the virtuous Faubourg Saint-Germain (they can rest easy, I will not name them!), all twelve of whom, if we are to believe the cackling dowagers of the quarter, had been “on very good terms” (a charming old expression) with the Comte Ravila de Ravilès, had conceived the singular idea of offering him a supper — he being the only male guest — to celebrate, well! they did not say what. A bold thing to do, but women, while individually timid, are as bold as brass when banded together. Probably not one of the whole party would have ventured to invite the comte to a tête-à-tête supper at her own house; but all together, each backing up the other, they did not fear gathering like mesmerists around this magnetic and most compromising individual, the Comte de Ravila de Ravilès.

“What a name!”

“A providential name, Madame.”

The Comte de Ravila de Ravilès, who, by the by, had always lived up to his imperious title, was the perfect incarnation of seducers, as told by romance novels and history, and even the old Marquise Guy de Ruy — a discontented old lady, with blue eyes, cold and sharp, but not so cold as her heart or so sharp as her tongue — admitted that, in these times, when the question of women grows less important each day, if there *was* anyone who could recall Don Juan, it must surely be he! Unfortunately, it was Don Juan in the fifth act. The witty Prince de Ligne said he could *not* make himself believe Alcibiades ever grew to be fifty; and here again the Comte de Ravila was to be a true Alcibiades. Like d'Orsay, a dandy hewn out of Michelangelo's marble, who was the handsomest of men until his final hour, Ravila had possessed the good looks particular to the Don Juan breed — that mysterious breed that does not proceed from father to son, like others, but appears here and there, at recurring intervals, in the families of mankind.

His was true beauty — of the insolent, joyous, imperial sort, *Juanesque* in fact (the word says it all and precludes description); and — had he



made a pact with the devil? — it was his still. Only, God was beginning to exact His penalty; life's cruel tiger claws already scratched that divine forehead, crowned with the roses of so many lips, and on his wide and wicked temples appeared the first white hairs that proclaim the impending invasion of the Barbarians and the Fall of the Empire. He carried it off, it is true, with the calm insouciance of pride surfeited with power; but women who had loved him would sometimes gaze at his wrinkles and white hairs with sad eyes. Who knows? perhaps they saw their own time passing on that whitening brow? Alas, for them as for him, it was the hour for the grim supper with the cold white-marble commander, after which only hell is left — first the hell of old age, then the other! And this perhaps is why, before sharing with him this last, bitter meal, they planned to offer him this supper of their own and made it a masterpiece.

Yes, a masterpiece of sweet taste and refinement, of patrician luxury, elegance, and pretty conceits; the most charming, the most delicious, the most delectable, the most alluring, and, above all, the most original of suppers. How original, just think for a moment! Commonly it is love of merriment or thirst for amusement that prompt a supper party; but this one was dedicated only to memory and regret, we might almost say to despair — but despair in full dress, despair hidden beneath smiles and laughter, despair that craved just one last party, one last folly, one more escapade toward youth fleetingly recaptured, one last intoxication — and so an end to it all forever.

The fair Amyphitryons of this incredible supper, so far removed from the timid habits of the society to which they belonged, must surely have felt like Sardanapalus on his funeral pyre when he heaped upon it wives, slaves, horses, jewels, all the splendid trappings of his life, to perish with him. They, too, collected at this impassioned supper all the splendors of their past. To it they brought all their beauty, wit and wisdom, magnificence and power, to pour them forth once and for all in one supreme conflagration.

The man before whom they wrapped and robed themselves in this garment of consuming fire counted for more in their eyes than all Asia did for Sardanapalus. They flirted with him as never women flirted with any man before, or with any roomful of men; and their keen coquetry was yet further inflamed by jealousy, which is concealed in good society but which they had no cause to conceal here, for they all knew that he had been the lover of each and all of them, and shame shared among so many ceases to be shame at all. The sole rivalry between them was, Who would carve his epitaph deepest in her heart?



That night he enjoyed the rich, sovereign, nonchalant, lingering pleasure of a confessor of nuns and a sultan. There he sat, like a king at the center of the table, facing the Comtesse de Chiffrevas, in her boudoir, her private Garden of Eden. The comte fixed his fiery blue eyes — heavenly blue, many a poor creature has thought, mistakenly — on his fair companions. All twelve were beautiful, all were dressed to perfection, and, seated around the festive table laden with crystal, lit candles, and flowers, they displayed, from the scarlet of the open rose to the soft gold of the mellow grape, every nuance of ripe and opulent charms.

There was none of that tender, unripe youth, the little girls Byron loathed, smelling of tarts, with thin, weedy figures, but splendid summers, sumptuous autumns (these were the seasons represented) — full curves and ample proportions, dazzling bosoms, beating in majestic swell above liberally cut bodices, and below the clear modeling of bare shoulders, arms of every type of beauty, but mostly powerful arms, Sabine biceps struggling against the Roman ravisher, vigorous enough to grasp the wheels of life's chariot and twine around the spokes and stop its course by sheer force.

I have spoken of happy ideas. One of the most charming of this supper was to have all the waiting done by chambermaids, that nothing might disturb the harmony of a celebration in which women were the only queens and did all the honors. Señor Don Juan then was able to bathe his burning gaze in a sea of living and luminous flesh, such as Rubens flaunts in his fleshy, robust pictures, but, besides, he could plunge his pride in the limpid yet troubled ether of all these hearts. The fact is, at bottom, and despite all appearances to the contrary, Don Juan is an ardent idealist! He is like the devil himself, that infernal slave driver, who prefers souls to bodies and actually traffics in the former.

Witty, well-bred, and aristocratic, but this evening as audacious as the king's pages — when there were a king and pages — they exhibited a scintillating brilliance, a dash, a verve, a *brio*, beyond compare. They felt themselves in better form than they had ever been on their most beautiful evenings; they felt a new and mysterious power in their innermost being of which, until then, they had never suspected the existence.

The joy of this discovery, the sensation of a tripled life force, the physical incitements, so stimulating to highly strung temperaments, the sparkling lights, the penetrating odor of so many flowers swooning in an atmosphere overheated with the emanations of all these lovely bodies, the sting of heady wines, all acted together. The mere thought of this supper, which had just that piquancy of sin the Neapolitan asked for in her sorbet to make it perfectly exquisite, the intoxicating notion



of complicity in this wild, wicked feast — not that it degenerated into one of the profligate dinners of the Regency; it remained a supper of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and the nineteenth century and of all those lovely bodices, with hearts beating beneath that had been under siege and still wanted to tempt the fray, not one lost so much as a pin — all these things together helped tune the magic harp that all of these marvelous creatures carried within, stretching the strings tautly, until they quivered again in passionate octaves and ineffable diapasons. This would make a curious page in his secret memoirs if Ravila were to write them one day. As I told Marquise Guy de Ruy, I was not at this supper, but I know the story since Ravila himself, faithful to the traditional indiscretion that characterizes the entire Don Juan breed, took the trouble one evening to tell it to me.

### III

It was getting late — or, rather, early! Morning was approaching. On the ceiling and on one spot in the pink silk curtains of the boudoir, otherwise hermetically closed, a splash of opalescent light seeped through and grew round, like an ever-enlarging eye, the curious eye of day, as if looking to see what was going on in this fiery room. A certain languor assailed these female knights of the Round Table, these merrymakers who had been so animated only a moment ago. This moment is familiar at every dinner party, when, wearied with the gaiety and emotional stress of the night, everything seems to languish at once, collapsing coiffures, burning cheeks, reddened or paled by excitement, tired, heavy eyes with dark circles beneath them, even the candles quiver in the many-branched candelabra, fiery flowers with stems of chiseled bronze and gold.

The conversation, hitherto general and vivacious, a game of shuttlecock where each had put in her stroke, had grow fragmentary and broken, and no distinct word was now audible amid the musical confusion of voices, which, with their aristocratic tones, mingled in a pretty babble, like birds at the break of day at the edges of a forest, when one of them — a high-pitched voice, imperious, almost insolent, as a duchess's should be — cried suddenly above all the rest to the Comte de Ravila what was evidently the conclusion of a previous whispered conversation between the two, which none of the others, each engaged in talk with her immediate neighbor, had heard.

"You are the reputed Don Juan of our day: you should tell us the story of the conquest that most flattered your pride as a ladies' man



and that you judge, in light of the present moment, the greatest love of your life."

And the question, as well as the voice that asked it, instantly cut short all the scattered conversations and imposed a sudden silence.

The voice was that of the Duchesse de \*\*\* — I will not lift the veil of asterisks, but you may know who it was when I tell you she is blond with the fairest complexion and hair and the darkest eyes under long golden eyebrows in all the Faubourg Saint-Germain. She was seated, like a saint at God's right hand, at the right hand of the Comte de Ravila, the god of this feast, who for the moment had waived his right to use his enemies as his footstool; she was slender and spiritual, like an arabesque and a fairy, in her dress of green velvet with glints of silver, its long train twining round her chair like the serpent's tail in which the alluring shape of the sea nymph Melusina terminates.

"What an idea!" said the Comtesse de Chiffrevas, who, as mistress of the house, was seconding the duchess's motion. "Yes, the love of all loves, inspired or felt, that you would gladly live again, were such a thing possible."

"Oh, I would be glad to live them all again!" cried Ravila with the unquenched lust of a Roman emperor which the utterly *blasé* sometimes have. And he raised his champagne glass — not the barbarian cup that has replaced it, but the tall and slender glass of our ancestors, the true champagne glass that we call a *flûte*, perhaps because of the celestial melodies in which it often bathes our heart! Then he embraced in one sweeping look the women who formed so magnificent a wreath around the table. "And yet," he went on, replacing his glass before him with a surprising melancholy for such a Nebuchadnezzar, who had never eaten grass, except in the tarragon salads at the Café Anglais — "and yet, how true that there is always *one* among all the emotions of a lifetime that shines in the memory more brightly than the rest, as life advances — one for which we would gladly exchange them all."

"The brightest diamond of the case," murmured the Comtesse Chiffrevas in a dreamy tone, perhaps looking back at the sparkling facets of her own career.

"The legends of my country," broke in the Princess Jable — who is from the foothills of the Ural Mountains — "tell of a famous and fabulous diamond, pink at first, but which soon turns black, yet remains a true diamond all the time, and sparkles all the more brilliantly for the change." She said it with the strange, exotic charm peculiar to her, this Bohemian. For a true Bohemian she is, married for love by the handsomest prince of all the exiled Polish nobility; yet having as much the



air of an aristocratic princess as if she had been born in the palace of the Jagellons.

A regular explosion followed! "Yes! yes!" they clamored in unison. "Tell us, Comte!" they urged in tones already vibrating with a passionate supplication, curiosity quivering in the very curls that fringed the back of their necks. They drew together, shoulder to shoulder; some with cheek on hand and elbow on the table, some reclining in their chairs, with open fans before their mouths, all challenging him with wide, inquisitive eyes.

"If you really want to hear the story," said the comte with the nonchalance of a man well aware how much procrastination adds to the keenness of desire.

"We do!" cried the duchess, gazing, as a Turkish despot might at his saber's edge, at the gold dessert knife she held in her fingers.

"Listen then," he said finally, still nonchalant.

They fell into attitudes of profound attention, and, fixing their gaze on his face, devoured him with their eyes. Every love story is interesting to a woman; but perhaps — who knows? — the charm of this one lay for each of them in the thought that the story he was about to tell might be her own. They were certain he would suppress all names and, where necessary, slur over transparent details, for they knew him to be too much of a gentleman and too well-bred to do otherwise; and their conviction of this fact made them even more eager to hear the story. They were not only eager, they were hopeful.

Yet their vanity found rivals in this memory recalled as the most beautiful in a life that must have been so full of them. The old sultan was going once more to throw the handkerchief that no hand would stoop to pick up but that the favored *one* it fell to would silently receive into her heart.

Knowing what his fair audience expected, you will now be able to realize the utterly unexpected thunderbolt that fell upon his listeners.

#### IV

"I have often heard moralists declare — men who have deeply experienced life," began the Comte de Ravila, "that the strongest of all our loves is neither the first nor the last, as many think, but the second. But in matters of love everything is true and everything is false, and at any rate it was not so with me. What you ask me about, ladies, the story I am about to tell you tonight, goes back to the most beautiful moment of my youth. I was not then what is technically called a 'young



man,' but I was young, and, as an old uncle of mine, a Knight of Malta, used to say to describe this epoch of life, I had sown my wild oats. I was in the full vigor of my prime, and I was in full relations (to use the pretty Italian phrase) with a woman you all know well and have all admired."

At this the look that each woman simultaneously cast at all the others, one and all eagerly drinking in the old serpent's words, was a thing to have seen, for, indeed, it is indescribable.

"The woman in question," Ravila went on, "was distinguished in every sense of the word. She was young, rich, of noble name, beautiful, witty, and artistic — and unaffected, with the genuine unaffectedness found in well-bred circles, when it is found. And she had no other pretension but to please me and devote herself to me, to be the fondest of mistresses and the best of friends.

"I was not, I have reason to believe, the first man she had loved. She had given her affection once before — and it was not to her husband. But the whole affair had been virtuous, platonic, utopian — the sort of love that practices rather than satisfies a woman's heart, that trains its powers for another and fuller passion that is bound to follow. It is trial love in fact, something like the *messe blanche* young priests repeat to practice that they may not blunder in the genuine, sacred mass to follow. When I came into her life, she was only at the 'white mass'; I was the genuine mass — and she went through it sumptuously, ceremoniously, like a cardinal."

At this all twelve delicious mouths smiled the prettiest smiles, like a circling undulation on the limpid surface of a pool. It was quick but entrancing.

"She was indeed one in a thousand!" the comte resumed. "Rarely have I known more real good-heartedness, more gentle compassion, more justness of feeling — and this even in love, which, as you know is not always good. Never have I seen less maneuvering, or less prudishness and vanity, two things so often entangled in the web of feminine character, like a skein clawed over by a cat. There was no cat in her. She was what those confounded writers who poison our minds with their phrases would call a 'primitive nature, embellished by civilization'; but she had borrowed from it only the pretty luxury of her habits, and not one of those little vices that sometimes seem even more alluring than the luxuries."

"Was she dark haired?" suddenly interrupted the duchess, point-blank, impatient with so much metaphysics.

"Ah! You miss my point!" exclaimed Ravila keenly. "Yes, she was dark



haired, her hair was black as the blackest jet, the most perfect ebony mirror I have ever seen gleaming in the lustrous, voluptuous convexity of a woman's head, but her complexion was fair — and it is by complexion, not hair, that one decides whether a woman is brunette or blonde," added the great observer, who had studied women for something else than just to paint their portraits. "She was blonde with black hair."

Each blonde head around the table (alas, only blonde *haired* they!) betrayed an almost imperceptible movement of disappointment. It was clear that the interest of the story for them had diminished.

"She had the locks of Night," resumed Ravila, "but crowning the face of Aurora, for indeed her face glowed with a rosy freshness of dawn, dazzling and rare, that had survived years of Parisian night life, which burns up so many roses in the flames of its candelabra. These flames only made her flush, so brilliant was the carmine that mantled her cheeks and lips! Indeed, this twofold radiance accorded well with the ruby she always wore on her forehead (the frontlet was still in fashion in those days), which, in combination with her flashing eyes, whose very brilliancy made it impossible to distinguish their color, formed a triangle, as it were, of three bright jewels! Tall, but robust and even majestic in figure, cut out to be the wife of a colonel of dragoons — her husband at that time was only a major in the light cavalry — she enjoyed, for all her fine-ladyhood, the vigorous health of a peasant woman, who drinks in the sun through every pore. She had all the heat and ardor of the sun in her veins, and in her very soul as well — ever present, and ever ready. But — and this was the strange part of it — this being, so strong and simple and unspoiled, this nature as generous and as pure as the red blood flushing her cheeks and coloring her rosy arms, was — can you believe it? — awkward in a lover's arms."

Here some lowered their eyes, but raised them again, mischievously . . .

"Yes! She was as awkward in this respect as she was reckless in her regard for appearances," continued Ravila, who vouchsafed no further information on this delicate point. "In fact, the man who loved her had to be incessantly teaching her two lessons, neither of which she ever really learned — not to needlessly affront public opinion, a foe that is always armed and always merciless, and to practice in the intimacy of private life the great art of love that keeps love from dying. Love she had in abundance, but the art and mystery of it were beyond her. She was the opposite of so many women, who possess only the art! Now, to comprehend and apply the Machiavellian politics of *The Prince*, you must be a Borgia to begin with. Borgia comes first, Machiavelli second; one is the poet, the other the critic. No Borgia was she, but just a good



woman in love, naive despite her monumental beauty, like the little maid in the rustic picture who tries to take up a handful of water from the fountain to quench her thirst, but in her trembling haste lets it trickle away through her fingers, and stands there confused.

"Yet in a way the contrast was almost delightful between this embarrassed awkwardness and the grand, passion-fraught personality of the woman, who would have deceived the most acute observer when seen in society — who knew love, and even love's bliss, but had not the faculty to return that which she received. Only, unfortunately, I was not artist enough to be content with this mere delight of contrast, and this would sometimes make her anxious, jealous, and violent — everything one becomes when one loves, and she loved! But all this, jealousy, anxiety, violence, was swallowed up in the inexhaustible kindness of her heart at the first sign of pain she thought she had inflicted — as awkward at wounding as she was at caressing! A lioness of an unknown species, she imagined she had claws, but lo! when she would show them, none were to be found within the sheath of her beautiful velvet paws. Her very scratches were velvet-soft!"

"What is the man driving at?" whispered the Comtesse de Chiffrevas to her neighbor. "This surely cannot be Don Juan's proudest triumph!"

All these complicated women could not understand such simplicity.

"Thus we lived," Ravila went on, "in an intimacy that was now and then interrupted by storms, yet never shipwrecked, an intimacy that, in the little village they call Paris, was a mystery to none. The marquise — she was a marquise..."

There were three at the table, and raven-locked, too. But they did not bat an eye. They knew only too well it was not of them he spoke. The only velvet about the trio was on the upper lip of one of the three — a lip bearing a voluptuous shadowing of down, and for the moment, I can assure you, a well-marked expression of disdain.

"... And a marquise three times over, just as pashas may be pashas of three tails," continued Ravila, who was getting into the swing of it. "The marquise was one of those women who have no thought of hiding anything and couldn't, even if they wanted to. Even her daughter, a child of thirteen, for all her youth and innocence saw only too clearly the nature of the feeling her mother had for me. I know not which of our poets has asked what the girls think of us, the girls whose mothers we have loved. A deep question I often put to myself when I caught the child's inquisitive gaze fixed black and menacing upon me from the ambush of her great, dark eyes. A ferociously reserved creature, she would more often than not leave the drawing room when I entered,



and, if obliged to remain, would invariably station herself as far from me as possible; she had an almost convulsive horror of my person — which she strove to hide but which was too strong for her and betrayed itself against her will by almost imperceptible signs. I noticed every one. The marquise, though hardly an observant woman, was forever warning me: ‘You must take care, dearest. I think my daughter is jealous of you.’

“But I was taking much better care than she.

“Had the little girl been the devil himself, I would have defied her to decipher my game — but her mother’s was as clear as day. Everything was visible in the rosy mirror of her face, so often troubled by passing clouds! From the strange dislike the child showed, I could not help thinking she had detected her mother’s secret in some indiscreet burst of feeling, some involuntary look fraught with excess of tenderness. I may tell you she was a funny-looking child, quite unworthy of the glorious mold she had issued from, an ugly child, even by her mother’s admission, who only loved her the more for it. A little rough-cut topaz — how shall I describe it? — a half-finished sculptor’s study in bronze, but with eyes black as night, with a magic of their own, which, later on —”

He stopped dead, as if regretting his burst of confidence and fearful of having said too much. Every face once more expressed an eager, vivid, perceptible curiosity, and the comtesse said, with a knowing air of pleased expectancy: “At last!”

## V

“In the earlier days of my liaison with her mother,” the Comte de Ravila resumed, “I had shown the child all the little fondling familiarities one has with children. I used to bring her bags of sugared almonds; I used to call her my ‘little mask,’ and very often, when talking to her mother, I would amuse myself by smoothing the curls that hung over her temple — thin, dark, sickly-looking curls, with highlights the color of decayed wood — but the ‘little mask,’ whose big mouth had a pretty smile for everybody else, at once waxed pensive, her cheerfulness disappeared, and her brows would knit fiercely. Her little face grew tense and rigid, and became a true mask, the wrinkled mask of an overburdened caryatid, which, when my hand brushed her forehead, seemed to bear the crushing weight of some vast entablature.

“After a while, meeting invariably with the same sullenness and apparent hostility, I took to leaving this sensitive plant alone, which drew in its sad-colored petals so violently at the least touch of a caress.



I even left off speaking to her! 'She feels you are robbing her,' the marquise would say to me. 'Her instinct tells her you are appropriating a portion of her mother's love.' Sometimes she would add outright: 'The child is my conscience, and her jealousy my remorse.'

"Once the marquise had tried to question her as to the profound disfavor in which she held me, but she had got nothing out of her but the broken, obstinate, stupid answers you have to drag out with a corkscrew of reiterated questions from a child that prefers not to speak: 'Nothing is the matter... I don't know...' and so on, and so on. Finally, seeing how hard and obstinate the little statue was, she had left off questioning her and turned away in weariness.

"I forgot to tell you one thing. The queer child was profoundly religious, in a gloomy, medieval, Spanish, superstitious sort of way. She twined around her meager little person all kinds of scapularies and stuck on her bosom, which was as flat as the back of your hand, and around her swarthy throat, a whole heap of crosses, Blessed Virgins, and Holy Spirits. 'You are a freethinker, you know,' the marquise said to me, 'Perhaps you have shocked her with your talk. Be very careful of anything you say before her, and do not add to my sins in the eyes of my child, toward whom I already feel myself so guilty!' Then, later on, the girl's behavior showing no change or improvement whatever, 'You will end by hating the child,' the marquise would complain anxiously, 'and I will not be able to blame you.' But she was wrong in this; my feeling toward the sullen child was one of simple indifference, when I took the trouble to think of her at all.

"I treated her with the ceremonious politeness usual between grown-up people who do not like each other. I addressed her formally, as *Mademoiselle*, and she replied with a freezing *Monsieur*. When I was there she would do nothing to attract admiration or even attention. Her mother could never persuade her to show me one of her drawings or play a piece on the piano in my presence. If ever I came upon her seated at the instrument practicing eagerly and industriously, she would stop dead, get up from the music stool, and refuse to go on.

"Once only, when there was company and her mother insisted she play, she consented to take her place at the open keyboard, with a victimized look that was anything but gracious, I can tell you, and began some drawing-room piece with abominably difficult fingering. I was standing by the fireplace and looked at her obliquely. Her back was toward me, and there was no mirror in front of her in which she could see I was looking at her. All of a sudden her back — she had poor posture and many a time her mother would tell her: 'If you cave your chest



in like that, you'll end up with consumption' — well, all of a sudden her back straightened as if my look had shot into her spine like a bullet, and, slamming down the lid of the piano with a resounding crash, she rushed out of the room. They went to look for her, but that evening, at any rate, nothing would induce her to come back.

"Well, vain as men are, it would seem their vanity is often blind, and, for all her strange behavior (and indeed I gave it very little attention), I never suspected the true feelings the mysterious creature entertained for me. Nor had her mother; jealous as the latter was of every woman who entered her drawing room, in this case her jealousy was as fast asleep as my own vanity. The truth was eventually revealed in a sufficiently startling fashion, when the marquise, who could keep nothing from her intimates, told me the story, her face still pale with the fright she had had, though bursting with laughter at the notion of having been frightened at all. Telling me was rather imprudent."

The comte had inflected the word "imprudent" with just that touch of emphasis a clever actor would, knowing that this was the thread on which the whole interest of his story now hung!

The mere hint was enough apparently, for all twelve faces flushed once more with an intensity of emotion comparable only to the cherubim's countenances before the throne of God! Is not a woman's curiosity as intense as the angels' adoration? He looked at all those cherubic faces (which did not end at the shoulders) and, no doubt finding them primed for what he had to say, quickly resumed and went on without further pause.

"Yes, she could not help bursting with laughter, merely to think of it! — so the marquise told me a while after, when she came to relate the story; but she had not been laughing earlier! — 'Just imagine the scene,' she began (I will endeavor to recall her exact words): 'I was seated just where we are now.'

"(This was one of those small double sofas known as a *dos-à-dos*, surely the best-designed piece of furniture for quarreling and making up again, without leaving one's seat).

"'But you were not where you are now — thank goodness! — when, who do you think was announced? — you would never guess — the priest of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Do you know him? No, you never go to church, which is very bad — so how should you know the poor old priest, who is a saint and who never sets foot inside the house of any woman in his parish unless it is to raise money for his poor or his church? At first I thought this was what he had come for now.

"'He had prepared my daughter for her first communion, and as she



took communion regularly, she had retained him as her confessor. For this reason, I had often invited the good priest to dine with us, but always in vain. On entering the room he displayed the greatest agitation, and I read in his usually placid features manifest signs of an embarrassment so extreme and so uncontrollable I could not set it down to the account of mere shyness. Involuntarily, the first words that escaped me were: "Good heavens, Father! What is the matter?"

"The matter, dear Madame," he began, "the matter is, you see before you the most embarrassed man in Europe. For fifty years I have been a minister in God's service, and all that time I have never had a more delicate mission or one that baffled me more completely."

"Then he sat down, asking me to have the door shut, to keep anyone from interrupting our interview. As you may suppose, all these solemn preliminaries began rather to frighten me.

"Noticing this, he added: "Do not be frightened, I beg of you. You will need all your calmness to attend to my story and to help me understand this unheard-of circumstance, which even now I cannot believe real. Your daughter, Madame, on whose behalf I am here, is — you know it as well as I do — an angel of purity and goodness. I know her very soul. I have held it between my two hands since she was a child of seven, and I am convinced she is mistaken — through sheer innocence, perhaps. But this morning she came to me to avow in confession — you will not believe it, nor can I, but the word must come out — that she is pregnant!"

"I let out a cry.

"I did the very same thing this morning in my confessional, the priest declared, "on hearing her make this assertion, accompanied as it was by every mark of the most genuine and terrible despair. I know the child thoroughly; she is absolutely ignorant of the world and of sin. Of all the young girls I confess, she is undoubtedly the one I could most unhesitatingly answer for before God. This is all I can tell you! We priests are the surgeons of souls, and it is our duty to deliver them of shameful secrets they would fain conceal, with hands careful neither to wound nor pollute. I therefore proceeded, with all possible guardedness, to interrogate, question, and cross-question the desperate girl. But, the avowal once made, the fault once confessed — she calls it a crime and her eternal damnation, fully believing herself, poor girl, a lost soul — she refused to say another word, maintaining an obstinate silence, which she broke only to beseech me to come to you, Madame, to inform you of the crime — 'for Mama must know,' she said, 'and I shall never, never be brave enough to tell her.'"



"You may easily imagine with what a mixture of amazement and anxiety I listened to the priest of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. I was just as sure as he was, surer in fact, of my little girl's innocence; but do not the innocent sometimes fall, out of very innocence? And what she had told the confessor was not impossible. I did not believe it — could not believe it — but still it was not in itself impossible! She was only thirteen, but she was a woman, and the very fact of her precocity had startled me before now. A fever, a frenzy of curiosity came over me.

"I must and will know all!" I cried to the worthy priest as he stood there listening to me with a bewildered air, plucking his hat to pieces in his agitation. "Leave me, Father. She would not speak before you, but I am certain she will tell me everything. I am certain I can drag everything out of her. Then we shall understand what is now so utterly incomprehensible."

"On this the good priest took his departure. The instant he was gone, I sprang upstairs to my daughter's room, not having patience enough to send for her and wait till she came.

"I found her not kneeling but prostrate before her crucifix, pale as death, her eyes dry and very red, like eyes that have wept many tears. I took her in my arms, seated her by my side, and then on my knees and told her I could not believe what her confessor had just been telling me was true.

"But here she interrupted me to assure me with a heartbroken voice and look that it was true, what he had said; and at this point, more and more anxious and astonished, I asked her who it was that —

"I left the sentence unfinished. The terrible moment had come! She hid her head and face on my shoulder, but I could see shades of red burning on her neck, and feel her shudder. The same leaden silence she had imposed upon her father confessor she now imposed upon me. She was impenetrable.

"It must be someone very much beneath you, since you are so ashamed?" I said, trying to make her speak in self-exculpation, for I knew she was proud.

"But still the same silence, the same burying of her head on my shoulder. This lasted what seemed to me an infinity, when suddenly she said, without lifting her head: "Swear you will forgive me, Mama!"

"I swore everything she asked me, at the risk of perjuring myself a hundred times over — little I cared! I was boiling with impatience. I thought my skull would burst and let my brains out.

"Well, then, it was Monsieur de Ravila!" she said in a low voice, without changing her position in my arms.



"Oh! the shock of hearing that name, Amédée! At one fell swoop I was being punished for the great offense of my life! You are so terrible a man where women are concerned, you have made me so fearful of rivals, that those horrible words "why not?" — so heart-rending when spoken of the man you love, yet suspect — stirred within me. What I felt, however, I had enough strength to hide from the cruel child, who had, perhaps guessed her mother's secret love.

"*"Monsieur de Ravila!"* I exclaimed in a tone I feared must betray everything. "Why, you never even speak to him!" "You avoid him," I was going to add, for my anger was rising, I felt it was — "You are surely very deceitful, the pair of you!" — but I refrained: Was I not bound to learn the details, one by one, of this vile tale of seduction? I began to question her with an enforced gentleness I thought would have killed me, when she released me from the torture, the agony, saying with perfect naïveté:

"*"It was one evening, Mother. He was in the big armchair by the fireside, facing the sofa. He sat there ever so long, then got up, and I — I had the misfortune to go and sit down in the same chair after him. Oh, Mama! It was just as if I had fallen into fire. I wanted to get up, but I could not. I didn't have the strength! And I felt — here, oh! mama — I thought that what I felt . . . was a baby!"*"

The marquise laughed, Ravila said, when she told him the story; but not one of the twelve women surrounding the table so much as thought of laughing — nor did Ravila.

"And this, ladies, believe me or not, as you please," he added by way of conclusion, "was the greatest love I ever inspired."

And with this he fell silent — a silence left unbroken. His listeners were pensive. Had they understood?

When Joseph was a slave in Lady Potiphar's household, he was so handsome, says the Koran, that in their dreamy state the women he waited on at table used to cut their fingers with their knives as they gazed at him. But we have traveled far since Joseph's time, and the pre-occupations we experience at dessert are not so absorbing nowadays.

"What a consummate idiot, with all her cleverness, your marquise was, to have told you about such a thing!" at last said the duchess, who allowed herself to be cynical, but who cut neither her fingers nor anything else with the gold dessert knife she still held in her hand.

The Comtesse de Chiffrevas was gazing fixedly into the depths of a glass of Rhine wine, a green crystal glass, as deep and mysterious as her own reverie.

"And the little mask?" she asked.



"Oh, she died quite young. She married somebody in the country and was dead when her mother told me the story," Ravila quietly replied.

"But for that . . ." said the duchess thoughtfully.

## HAPPINESS IN CRIME

*"In these pleasant days, when someone tells a true story, it is to be supposed that the devil dictated it."*

ONE MORNING LAST autumn, I was walking in the Jardin des Plantes with Doctor Torty, one of my oldest acquaintances. When I was still a child, Doctor Torty was practicing in the town of V——, but after thirty years of that agreeable practice and when all his patients were dead — his "tenants" as he called them, who brought him more than the tenants do to their landlords in the best part of Normandy — he had not cared to look for any others; getting on in age and ferociously independent, like a horse that has always chomped at the bit and ended by breaking it, he came to amuse himself in Paris and lived in the neighborhood of the Jardin des Plantes — on the Rue Cuvier, I think. He practiced medicine only for his own pleasure, but that was very often, for he was a doctor to the fingertips, clever in his profession and a great observer of many other cases besides physiological or pathological ones.

Have you ever met Doctor Torty? He was one of those bold and vigorous minds that you might call "unmittened" after that good and proverbial reason that "a cat in mittens catches no mice," and this wily character had caught a good many and wanted to catch still more. I liked him very much — I think for those sides of his character that most displeased others. In fact, few people did like this brusque and eccentric old doctor when they were well, but once they were ill, those who disliked him most, salaamed to him as the savages did to Robinson Crusoe's gun, but not for the same reason — because it could kill them — but for a contrary reason — because he could cure them.

Had it not been for that important consideration, the doctor would never have made twenty thousand livres a year in a prudish, devout, aristocratic town, which would have shown him to the carriage gates of their mansions had its inhabitants been prompted solely by their opinions and antipathies. He was aware of this, and took it in stride, and even joked about it during his thirty years' "lease" at V——. "They



had," he said, "to choose between me and extreme unction, and, devout as they were, they preferred me to the sacramental oil."

As you see, the doctor did not stand on ceremony. His wit was rather profane. He was a true disciple of Cabanis in medical philosophy, and, like his old comrade Chaussier, belonged to that terrible school of materialistic doctors, and, like Dubois — the first one — was distinguished by a cynical contempt for all things, and addressed duchesses and the maids of honor of the empress as "my good woman" — just as he would a fish-wife.

To give you an idea of his cynical humor, I may mention that he said one night at the club, as he gazed sumptuously and with a look of ownership at the dazzling table set for a hundred and twenty guests: "I made them all!"

Moses could not have been prouder when he showed the staff with which he had struck the rock.

But what do you expect, Madame? He didn't have a bump of respect, and even declared that where that bump existed on other men's heads, there was a hole in his.

He was old, over seventy, but forthright, robust, and wiry, with a sarcastic face under his light-chestnut wig, which was very shiny, lustrous, and short, and penetrating eyes that required no glasses. He nearly always dressed in gray or that shade of brown called "Moscow smoke," and looked very unlike the Paris doctors, stiff in their white cravats like their dead patients in shrouds.

He was quite a different sort of man. His suede gloves and thick-soled boots gave him the look of a horseman — and he certainly was a horseman, for he had ridden every day for thirty years, his charivari buttoned to his thigh, over roads that would have broken a centaur in half. All this could be seen in the way he arched his back and held out his chest and swayed on his strong legs, which had never felt a twinge of rheumatism and were bowed like a postilion's. He might have been called a French provincial Leatherstocking — like James Fenimore Cooper's hero, he scoffed at the laws of society and had not replaced them by the idea of God. Such a close observer could not fail to be a misanthrope — and he was. But he was not a misanthrope like Alceste. He never displayed any virtuous indignation, nor was he ever angry. No, he simply despised man as quietly as he took a pinch of snuff and didn't have even as much pleasure in the scorn as he had in the pinch. Such was, in short, the character of Doctor Torty, with whom I was then walking.

It was one of those bright, clear autumn days that can keep the swallows from leaving. Noon had just sounded from Notre Dame, and the



deep boom of the bell sent luminous vibrations over the green, shimmering river. The red foliage of the trees had shaken off the blue fog that envelops them on October mornings, and the sun was agreeably warm on our backs, as the doctor and I stopped to look at the famous black panther, which died the following winter of consumption, just like a young girl.

All around us were the usual visitors to zoological gardens, soldiers and nursemaids, who love to stroll around the cages and throw nutshells and chestnut rinds at the sleepy animals. The panther, before whose cage we had arrived, was of that particular species from the island of Java, the country where nature is most luxuriant and seems itself like some great tigress untamable by man. In Java the flowers have more brilliancy and perfume, the fruits more taste, the animals more beauty and strength, than in any other country in the world. Nothing can express the violence of life in a country at once poignant and deadly, enchanting and poisonous!

Lying gracefully with its paws stretched out in front, its head up, and its emerald eyes motionless, the panther was a splendid specimen of the fearsome products of the country. Not a touch of yellow sullied its black velvet coat — of a blackness so deep and matte that the sunlight was absorbed by it as water is absorbed by a sponge. When you turned from this ideal form of supple beauty — of terrific force in repose, of silent and royal disdain — to the human creatures who were timidly gazing at it, open eyed and open mouthed, it was not the human beings who had the superiority over the animal, but the animal, so much so that it was almost humiliating.

I had just whispered this remark to the doctor when two persons made their way through the group and planted themselves just in front of the panther.

"Yes," said the doctor, "but look now, and you will see that the equilibrium between the species is restored."

They were a man and a woman, both tall, and I guessed at a glance that they both belonged to the upper ranks of Paris society. Neither was young, but both were handsome. The man might have been forty-seven or more, and the woman upward of forty. They had therefore, as sailors who have returned from Tierra del Fuego say, "crossed the line" — that fatal line more terrible than the equator, the line that once you pass you never pass again on the seas of life. But they appeared to care little and showed no signs of melancholy.

The man, slender and patrician in a trim black frock coat, resembled a cavalry officer, wearing an outfit in a portrait by Titian, and with his



haughty, effeminate bearing, and his hooked nose and pointy mustache, he might have been one of Henry III's *mignons*; to make the resemblance more complete, he wore his hair short and donned two dark-blue sapphire earrings, which reminded one of the two emeralds Sbogar wore in the same place. Except for this ridiculous detail (as society would have called it) and one that exhibited a disdain for the tastes and opinions of the time, he was simply a dandy in the sense in which Brummel understood the word, that is, "to be unremarkable," and he would have passed unnoticed had it not been for the woman he had on his arm.

In fact, this woman attracted more attention than the man who accompanied her, and she held it longer. She was almost as tall as he. And as she was dressed entirely in black, her sheer size, her mysterious pride, and her strength made one think of the black Isis of the Egyptian Museum. For, strange to say, in this handsome couple it was the woman who had the muscles and the man who possessed the nerves.

I could see only her profile, but the profile is either the greatest peril of beauty or its most astonishing manifestation. Never had I seen a purer or more noble outline. Her eyes I could not judge, fixed as they were on the panther, which, no doubt, received from them a magnetic and disagreeable impression, for, though motionless before, it became yet more rigid, and, without moving its head or even its whiskers, it slowly dropped its eyelids over its green, starlike eyes — as a cat will do when dazzled by a strong light — and seemed unable to bear the woman's fixed glance.

"Ah, ah! Panther against panther," the doctor murmured in my ear; "but satin is stronger than velvet."

The satin was the woman, who wore a dress of that gleaming material — a dress with a long train. The doctor was right. Black, supple, as powerfully muscular, as royal in bearing — as beautiful for her own species, and with a charm still more disquieting — this woman, this unknown person, was like a human panther standing before the animal panther whom she had eclipsed; and the animal no doubt felt it when it had closed its eyes.

But the woman — if she was one — was not content with this triumph. She was lacking in generosity. She wanted her rival to see who had humiliated it, and to open its eyes. Without saying a word, she undid the twelve buttons of the violet glove that so closely fitted her magnificent arm, took off the glove, and, daringly putting her hand between the bars of the cage, flicked the panther's muzzle with it. The panther made but one movement — but what a movement! — and



snapped its teeth like lightning. A cry went up from the little group around the cage. We thought her hand must be bitten off at the wrist. But it was only the glove. The panther had swallowed it. The terrible beast, deeply insulted, had opened its eyes to their full size, and its nostrils quivered with anger.

"Fool!" said the man, seizing the beautiful hand that had just escaped this terrible bite.

You know how that word *fool* is sometimes said. That was how he said it; then he kissed her hand passionately.

And as she turned to look at him kiss her bare arm, I saw her eyes — eyes that fascinated tigers and were at the present fascinated by a man; her eyes, two large black diamonds, were meant to express all the pride of life but now expressed all the adoration of love.

Those eyes told a whole poem. The man had not released the arm that had just felt the panther's feverish breath, and, holding it to his heart, led the woman to the broad walk of the garden, indifferent to the murmurs and exclamations of the people — still somewhat excited by the danger this imprudent woman had just encountered — and walked quietly along it. They passed close to the doctor and me, but their faces were turned toward each other, and they were pressing so close together that it seemed as though they wished to penetrate each other, to make one body of the two, and see nothing but themselves. They were both, as one could see when they passed, of those superior beings who do not even perceive that their feet touch the ground and who pass through the world in a cloud, like the immortals of Homer.

Such things are rare in Paris, and we therefore stopped to watch this splendid couple — the woman allowing the long train to trail in the dust, like a peacock disdainful of its plumage.

They looked superb as they passed along, under the rays of the mid-day sun, in all the majesty of their mutual embrace. We watched them to the gate, where a carriage, the horses resplendent in plated harness, was awaiting them.

"They forget the universe," I said to the doctor.

"Oh, a lot they care for the universe!" he replied in his sarcastic voice. "They see nothing in all creation, and, what is worse, they even pass close to their doctor without noticing him."

"What, you, Doctor!" I cried. "Then you can tell me who they are, my dear Doctor."

The doctor paused for effect — he was a cunning old man!

"Well!" he said quietly, "they are Philemon and Baucis — that's all."

"Good gracious! What a proud-looking Philemon and Baucis," I



replied, "and not much resemblance to those of antiquity. But that is not their name, Doctor. What is their name?"

"What!" replied the doctor. "In the fashionable society in which you mix, you have never heard of the Comte and Comtesse Serlon de Savigny as the models of conjugal love?"

"No," I replied; "in the fashionable world in which I mix, we do not talk much about conjugal love."

"Hmm! Hmm! That is very probable," said the doctor — more in reply to his own thoughts than to mine. "In that society — which is also theirs — what is proper one can often do without. But, besides having another reason for not going into society, they live nearly the whole year in their old château at Savigny, in the Cotentin. Some rumors about them circulated in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, but as the nobility all hang together, they are never mentioned there now."

"What were these rumors? You interest me greatly, Doctor. The château of Savigny is not very far from the town of V——, where you used to practice, so you must know something about them."

"Oh, those rumors!" said the doctor, pensively taking a pinch of snuff. "They were believed to be false. It all passed over. But though marriages of inclination, and the happiness that springs from them, are the ideals of all mothers in the country, who are generally virtuous and romantic, they did not talk very much — at least those I knew — to their daughters about this particular one."

"And yet you called them Philemon and Baucis, Doctor."

"Baucis! Baucis! Hmm!" interrupted Doctor Torty, crooking his first finger and passing it over his long parrotlike nose (one of his gestures). "Don't you think that woman looks less like Baucis than Lady Macbeth?"

"Doctor — my dear and adorable Doctor," I continued as coaxingly as I could, "you will tell me all you know about the Comte and Comtesse de Savigny, won't you?"

"The doctor is the confessor in these times," said the doctor, in a mock-serious manner. "He has replaced the priest, sir, and, like the priest, is obliged to keep the secrets of confession."

He looked at me mischievously, for he knew my respect and regard for Catholicism, of which he was the enemy. He winked and thought he had caught me.

"And he is going to keep it — as the priest does!" he exclaimed with a cynical laugh. "Come along with me where we can talk."

He led me to the wide, tree-lined path between the Jardin des Plantes and the boulevard de l'Hôpital; we sat down on one of the green benches, and he began.



"My dear fellow, you must search pretty deeply for the beginning of this story, as you would for a bullet over which the flesh has formed; for oblivion is like the flesh of living things which forms over events and prevents you from seeing anything, or even suspecting the place after a certain time.

"It was in the first years after the Restoration. A regiment of the guards passed through the town of V——, and, being obliged, for some military reason or other, to stay there two days, the officers determined to give a show of arms in honor of the town. As a matter of fact, the town fully deserved that the officers of the guards should do it that honor. It was, as they said then, more royalist than the king. Considering its size (for it contained barely five or six thousand souls), it teemed with nobility. More than thirty young men belonging to the best families of the place were then serving either in the Gardes-du-Corps or the Prince's Regiment, and the officers then passing through V—— knew them nearly all. But the principal reason that induced the officers to give this parade was the reputation of V——, famous for its duels. The Revolution of 1789 had rescinded from the nobles the right to wear their swords, but at V—— they proved that, if they no longer wore them, they knew how to use them.

"The parade given by the officers was a brilliant success. It brought together all the best swordsmen of the district, and even some amateurs who belonged to a younger generation and who had not much cultivated, as they did in former days, an art so difficult and complicated as fencing; and all showed such enthusiasm for the glorious weapon of our forefathers that an old fencing instructor of the regiment, who had served his time three or four times over and whose arm was covered with chevrons, thought it would be a good idea to open a school of arms at V—— and end his days there; and the colonel, to whom he broached the subject, approved of the plan and gave him his discharge.

"The idea was quite a stroke of genius on the part of the fencing master, whose name was Stassin but who was more generally known as 'Old Straight-Thrust.'

"For a long time past there had been no proper fencing school at V——. This had long been a subject of regret among the nobility, who were obliged to teach their own sons or else have recourse to some friend who had left the army — and who was perhaps not a good swordsman or did not know how to teach.

"The inhabitants of V—— prided themselves on being very particular. They really possessed the sacred fire. It was not enough to be able to kill their man — they wished to kill him skillfully and artistically on



principle. They were most particular about a graceful attitude and had a profound contempt for those strong but awkward swordsmen who might be dangerous antagonists in a duel but who were not fencers in the strict sense of the word.

"Old Straight-Thrust had been a good man in his youth and remained so. When quite young, he had beaten all the other instructors in the camp and had carried off the prize — a pair of silver-mounted foils and masks — and was in fact one of those swordsmen who are exceptionally endowed by nature and cannot be produced by schools. He was, naturally, the admiration of all V——, and soon was something more. The sword is a great leveler. In the days of the old monarchy, kings ennobled their fencing instructors. Louis XV — if I recollect correctly — gave his instructor Danet (who has left us a book on fencing) four of his fleurs-de-lis, between two crossed swords, as his coat of arms. These country gentlemen, who were stuffed full of monarchical ideas, very soon looked upon the old fencing master as an equal, as though he had been one of their own.

"So far, Stassin, otherwise known as Old Straight-Thrust, was to be congratulated on his good fortune; but, unfortunately, the red-leather heart on the white-leather padded jacket, which the old fencing master put on when he gave a lesson, was not the only one he possessed.

"He had, underneath that one, another heart, which sought an affinity among all the young women of V——. A soldier's heart is always made of gunpowder, it would seem; and when age has dried the powder, it catches fire all the more readily. The women of V—— are so pretty that there were plenty of sparks everywhere for the dry powder of the fencing master, and his history was that of a great many other old soldiers. After having knocked about in all the countries of Europe and chucked under the chin or taken around the waist all the girls whom the devil had put in his road, the old soldier of the First Empire committed his last folly by marrying, when he was past fifty, and with all the necessary formalities and sacraments — at the municipality and the church — a working girl from V——. Of course, she — I know the working girls of that country, I have attended enough of them in childbirth! — presented him at the end of nine months, day for day, with a child; and that child, who was a girl, is no other, my dear fellow, than the woman with the air of a goddess who has just passed, brushing us insolently with the breeze of her dress and taking no more notice of us than if we had not been there."

"The Comtesse de Savigny!" I cried.

"Yes, the Comtesse de Savigny herself! Ah, you must not look at the



origin of women any more than that of nations; you should never look into anyone's cradle. I remember having seen at Stockholm that of Charles XII, which looked like a horse's manger, was roughly colored in red, and did not stand level on its four legs. Yet that was what that tempest of a man came out of. Besides, all cradles are sewers, of which you are obliged to change the linen several times a day, and that is never poetic, for those who believe in poetry, except when the child is no longer there."

And to punctuate what he said, the doctor, at this point of his story, struck his thigh with one of his suede gloves, which he held by the middle finger, and the noise of the suede against his thigh proved to one who knows something about music that the doctor was still quite muscular.

He waited, but I did not contradict his statements, and, seeing that I said nothing, he continued:

"Like all old soldiers, who are even fond of other people's children, Old Straight-Thrust doted on his. There was nothing astonishing in that. When a man who is already old has a child, he loves it more than if he were young, for vanity, which doubles everything, doubles the paternal instinct as well. All the fellows I have known who became fathers late in life adored their offspring and were as comically proud of it as though it were a brilliant feat. Nature, who was laughing at them, had convinced them in their hearts that they were young again. I know of only one happiness more intoxicating, one pride more droll; and that is when an old man, instead of one child, makes two at once. Old Straight-Thrust did not have the paternal pride of being the father of twins, but it is certain that his child was big enough to make two ordinary ones. His daughter — you have seen her and know whether she turned out as well as she promised — was a wonderful child, both for strength and beauty.

"The first care of the old fencing master was to look out for a godfather among the noblemen who continually haunted his school, and he chose, from among them all, the Comte d'Avise, the oldest of all the wielders of the foil and who, during the emigration, had himself been a fencing master in London, at ever so many guineas a lesson.

"Comte d'Avise de Sortoville, in Beaumont, who was already a knight of Saint Louis and a captain of dragoons before the Revolution — and who was at least seventy years of age — could still 'button' the young fellows in fine style. He was a mischievous old rascal, and some of his jokes were rather ferocious. Thus, for instance, he would pass the blade of his foil through the flame of a candle, and when he had rendered it



so hard that it would not bend and would smash your breastbone or your ribs, he would call it his 'rascal chaser.'

"He was very fond of Old Straight-Thrust and treated him familiarly. 'The daughter of a man like you,' he said, 'should be named after the sword of an illustrious warrior. Let's call her Haute-Claire!'

"And that was the name she was given. The parish priest of V—— made quite a grimace at this unaccustomed name, which had never been heard at the font of his church, but since the godfather was the Comte d'Avice, and there will always be, in spite of the liberals and their squawking, indestructible ties between the nobility and the clergy, and since, on the other hand, there is a saint named Claire in the Roman calendar, the name of Oliver's sword was given to the child without the town of V—— being greatly disturbed.

"Such a name seemed to augur a destiny. The old fencing master, who loved his profession almost as much as his daughter, resolved to teach her and to leave her his talent as a dowry. But this was a poor pittance considering modern fashions — which the poor old devil did not foresee.

"As soon as the child could stand, he began to give her fencing lessons, and since the little girl was solidly built, with joints like thin steel, he developed her in such an amazing manner that at ten years old she seemed to be fifteen and could admirably hold her own with the foils against her father, or the best fencers of the town of V——. Little Hauteclaire Stassin was talked about everywhere, and later she became Mademoiselle Hauteclaire Stassin. It was especially, as you may suppose, among the young ladies of the town — into whose society, however well Old Straight-Thrust might stand with their fathers, Stassin's daughter could not decently enter — that there was an incredible (or rather a perfectly credible) curiosity about her, mixed with spite and envy. Their fathers and brothers spoke of her with astonishment and admiration before them, and they wished to inspect closely this female Saint George whose beauty was said to equal her skill in fencing. They saw her only from a distance. I was then living at V——, and I was often a witness of this burning curiosity. Old Straight-Thrust, who had, during the empire, served in the hussars and had made a good deal of money with his fencing school, had bought a horse so that he might give riding lessons to his daughter, and as the whole year round he had young horses to break in for some of his pupils, he often rode with Hauteclaire along the roads surrounding the town.

"I met them many times when returning from my professional visits, and in these meetings I was able to judge the extreme interest this fine, tall, young woman had aroused among the other young women



of the district. I was always riding around the roads at that time, and I frequently saw young ladies in carriages going to make calls at some of the neighboring châteaux. Well! You should have seen the haste, and I may say the imprudence, with which they rushed to the carriage windows whenever Mademoiselle Hauteclair Stassin was seen on the road riding alongside her father. But their trouble was useless, and the next day when I called on their mothers they would tell me they had seen nothing but the figure of the young woman, built like an Amazon, her face concealed by a thick, blue veil.

"Mademoiselle Hauteclair Stassin was known only to the men of V——. Foil in hand, her face hidden by the mask, which she seldom removed, she hardly ever left the fencing school and often gave lessons in place of her father, who was beginning to grow feeble. She rarely showed herself in the street, the only place well-bred women could see her, besides church, and though she went to mass every Sunday, both at church and in the street she was as much masked as she was in the school, the lace of her black veil even darker and more closely woven than the wires of her fencing mask. Was there conceit or affectation in thus hiding herself from the public gaze? It is very possible; but who knows? Who can say? And was not this young woman, who dropped the mask only for the veil, more impenetrable in character than in appearance as events would only prove too well?

"You will understand, my dear fellow, that I am obliged to pass rapidly over the details of this period to arrive at the moment when my story really begins. Mademoiselle Hauteclair was then about seventeen. Old Straight-Thrust had become a stout old bourgeois. He had lost his wife, and he himself was morally killed by the Revolution of July, which sent all the nobles grieving off to their châteaux and emptied the fencing school. Moreover, the gout, which was not afraid of the old master's challenges, had attacked him and was taking him as fast as possible to the cemetery. To a doctor who knew anything about diagnosis, there was no doubt about that; it was easy enough to see, and I gave him a short time to live.

"One morning there was brought to the fencing school — by the Vicomte de Taillebois and Chevalier de Mesnilgrand — a young man who, after being educated in some distant place, had returned to inhabit his ancestral château, his father having recently died. This was the Comte Serlon de Savigny, the intended (as they said in the village, in their small-town way) of Mademoiselle Delphine de Cantor. The Comte de Savigny was certainly one of the most distinguished of the golden youth of V——, in this era filled with golden youth, for there was youth



in this old world. He had heard much of the famous Hauteclaire Stassin and wanted to see this miracle. He found her to be what she was, a beautiful young girl, looking provocative and exciting in her silk breeches, which showed off the shape of her Pallas of Velletri body, and the black leather jacket tightly fitting her strong, supple figure — one of those figures that the Circassian women obtain by confining their daughters in a leather belt, which only the development of the body can break.

"Hauteclaire Stassin was as serious as a Clorinda. He watched her give her lesson and asked whether he might be permitted to cross swords with her. But the Comte de Savigny was not the Tancred of the situation. Mademoiselle Hauteclaire Stassin bent her foil into a semicircle ever so many times on the heart of the handsome Serlon, and she was not touched once.

"'I cannot touch you, Mademoiselle,' he said courteously. 'Is that an omen?'

"Was the young man's conceit overcome by love?

"From then on, the Comte de Savigny came every day to the fencing school of Old Straight-Thrust to take a lesson.

"The comte's château was only a few leagues away, and he could easily ride or drive into the town without remark, for though the slightest thing was enough to provoke scandal, the love of fencing explained all. Savigny took no one into his confidence. He even avoided taking his lesson at the same time as the other young men of the town. He was a young man who was not wanting in cunning. What passed between him and Hauteclaire, if anything passed at all, no one knew or suspected. His marriage with Mademoiselle Delphine de Cantor had been arranged by the two families years before and was too far advanced for either party to draw back. They were to be married three months after his return, and he took the opportunity of spending a month in V—— near his fiancée, with whom he passed all his days in the orthodox manner, but whom he left in the evening to take his fencing lesson.

"Like everybody else in the town, Mademoiselle Hauteclaire heard the marriage notice of Comte de Savigny and Mademoiselle de Cantor proclaimed at the parish church of V——, but neither her attitude nor her face betrayed that she took any interest whatever in those public declarations. It is true that no one was on the lookout, since no liaison between Savigny and the fair Hauteclaire was suspected. Once the marriage was celebrated, the comtesse went to live quietly in her château, but her husband did not give up his usual habits and came to town every day. Many of the other gentlemen of the locality did the same, by the way.



"Time went on. Old Straight-Thrust died. The school was shut down for a short time, and then reopened. Mademoiselle Hauteclair Stassin announced that she would continue giving lessons, and, far from having fewer pupils than before her father's death, she had more. Men are all the same. Anything strange, done by another man, displeases them; but if it is done by one in petticoats, they rather like it. A woman who does what a man does, though she may not do it half as well, will always have a marked advantage over a man, especially in France. But what Mademoiselle Hauteclair Stassin did, she did better than a man. She had become more skillful than her father. When she gave demonstrations she was incomparable, and her sword play was splendid. Her coups were irresistible — the kind that cannot be learned anymore than the strokes of an archer or the wrist work of a violin player cannot be taught.

"I used to fence a little in those days, as everyone else around me did, and I must confess that some of her passes simply charmed me. Among other things, she had a way of disengaging from *carte* to *tierce*, which was like magic. It was not a foil that hit you, it was a bullet. Parry as rapidly as a man would, his blade only cut the air, even when she had warned him that she was about to disengage, and he was infallibly hit on the shoulder or breast, without his blade being able even to meet hers. I have seen swordsmen become quite wild at this coup, which they called sleight of hand, and ready to swallow their foil in fury. If she had not been a woman, they would have tried to pick a fight with her over that coup. A man would have had twenty duels on his hands.

"But apart from this phenomenal talent, so little suited for a woman and from which she nobly made her living, this poor young girl, who had no resource but her foil, found herself surrounded by the richest young men of the town — among whom there were some sad scapegraces and some conceited asses — without her good reputation suffering at all.

"Nothing was said about Mademoiselle Hauteclair Stassin concerning either Savigny or anyone else. 'She seems to be a decent woman,' the well-bred girls said, as though talking of an actress.

"I myself — as I have been talking about myself — who prided myself on my powers of observation, had the same opinion as the whole town concerning the virtue of Hauteclair. I sometimes went to the fencing school, both before and after the marriage of Monsieur de Savigny, and I never saw anything but a serious young woman going about her business. She was, I ought to say, rather imposing and made everybody treat her with respect, and she was not familiar or casual with anyone. Her face was extremely proud and did not have that passionate expres-



sion that so struck you just now; it betrayed neither chagrin, nor pre-occupation, nor anything of a nature to suggest in the most distant manner the astonishing circumstance that, in the atmosphere of the quiet and plodding little town, had the same effect as a cannon shot and broke the windows.

“Mademoiselle Hauteclair Stassin disappeared!”

“She had disappeared! How? Why? Where had she gone? No one knew; but what was certain was that she had disappeared. First there was an outcry, followed by silence, but the silence did not last long. Tongues began to wag. They had been long kept in — like the water in a mill stream which rushes out and makes the wheel spin furiously when the floodgates are opened — and now began to chatter about this unexpected, inexplicable disappearance, for Mademoiselle Hauteclair had disappeared without saying a word or writing a note to anybody. She had disappeared as people disappear when they really wish to disappear — not leaving behind them some trifling trace that others can seize to explain their disappearance. She had disappeared in the most complete manner. She had not done ‘a moonlight flit,’ as it is termed, for she had not left a single debt behind.

“The neighbors’ tongue mill had nothing to grind, but it turned all the same and cruelly ground her reputation to bits.

“All that was known about her was gone over with a fine-toothed comb. How, and with whom, had this proud and reserved girl run away? Who had carried her off? For it was certain that someone had carried her off. No reply could be given. It was enough to drive any little town mad, and V—— certainly went mad. There were motives for its indignation. Only fancy what the town had lost. First, it lost what it did not know. Then it lost its time in guessing about a girl it thought it knew and did not, because it had not judged her capable of disappearing ‘like that.’ Then it had lost the girl herself, who ought to have grown old or married, like all the other girls confined to this provincial town like horses in a pen. And finally, in losing Mademoiselle Stassin (who was now spoken of only as ‘that Stassin girl’), the town had lost a school of arms, celebrated throughout the region, the distinction, ornament, and honor of the town, its badge, its banner.

“All these losses were hard to bear and were so many reasons comprised in one for dragging the irreproachable Hauteclair through a mire of supposition. And dragged through the mire she was. Except a few old squires who were too noble to indulge in gossip, and who, like her godfather, the Comte d’Avise, had known her as a child, and who, if they thought about the matter at all, regarded it as very natural that



she had found a better shoe for her foot than a fencing sandal, not a soul defended Hauteclair Stassin. She had offended the self-conceit of all; and the young men were the most bitter and turned against her the most fiercely, because she had not run away with any of them.

"For a long time that was their great grief and their great anxiety. With whom had she run away? Many of the young men went every year to spend a month or two of the winter in Paris, and two or three of them declared they had seen and recognized her there — at the theater, or on horseback in the Champs-Élysées, alone or in company — but they were not quite sure. They could affirm nothing. It might have been she or it might not. But it showed their preoccupation with her. They could not stop thinking about this girl they had all admired so much, and who in disappearing had distressed a town devoted to the sword, of which she was the great *artiste*, the *diva*, the star. When that star was extinguished — in other words, after the disappearance of the celebrated Hauteclair — the town of V—— fell into the languor and pallor that is the normal condition of all country towns that have no center of activity toward which all tastes and passions converge. The love of arms grew weak, and without the youthful swordsmen the town became dull. The young nobles who used to ride into the town every day to fence exchanged the foil for the gun. They became sportsmen and remained on their own estates or in their woods — the Comte de Savigny like all the others. He came to V—— less and less frequently, and when I did meet him occasionally, it was at the house of his wife's parents, who were patients of mine.

"Only, as I did not suspect at that time that there was anything between him and Hauteclair, who had disappeared so suddenly, I had no reason to speak to him about it — indeed, people had gotten tired of talking about it by that time — nor did he ever speak to me of Hauteclair, or of the occasions when we had met at the fencing school, and never made the slightest allusion to her."

"I can hear your little wooden clogs coming," I said to the doctor, using an expression current in the district he was talking about and which is also my native country. "It was he who had abducted her."

"Oh, no! Not at all," replied the doctor. "Better than that. But you would never guess what it was.

"Besides, in the country especially, an elopement is not very easily kept secret, and, moreover, the Comte de Savigny had never left the château of Savigny since his marriage.

"He lived there, as everybody knew, along with his wife, in what appeared to be a perpetual honeymoon — and as everything is remarked



and talked about in the country, remarks were made about Savigny, and he was cited as one of those husbands who are so rare they ought to be burned (provincial humor) and their ashes thrown over the others. God only knows how long I myself should have been duped by this reputation, had I not been urgently called one day — more than a year after the disappearance of Hauteclair Stassin — to the château of Savigny, the lady of the house having taken ill.

"I left at once, and on my arrival was taken to the comtesse, who indeed was quite ill with one of those vague and complicated sicknesses that are more dangerous than a clear-cut case. She was one of those women of good family who no longer exist, elegant, distinguished, and haughty, and whose pallor and thinness seem to say, 'I am conquered by the era, like all my breed. I am dying, but I despise you,' and, devil take me! plebeian as I am, and though it is not very philosophical, I cannot help finding that beautiful!

"The comtesse was lying on a couch in a kind of parlor with black beams and white walls, very large, very high, and decorated with a profusion of old art that did honor to the taste of the old counts of Savigny. A solitary lamp illuminated this vast room, and its light, rendered more mysterious by the green shade that veiled it, fell on the comtesse, whose cheeks were burning with fever. She had been ill for several days, and Savigny — in order to watch her better — had had a small bed placed by the side of the couch of his beloved better half. But the fever was tenacious in spite of all his attention, and therefore he had sent for me. He was standing there, with his back to the fire, looking so gloomy and disturbed as to make me believe that he passionately loved his wife and believed her to be in danger. But the disturbed expression on his face was not for her but for another, whom I did not suspect to be at the château de Savigny and the sight of whom amazed me beyond measure. It was Hauteclair."

"The devil! That was risky!" I said to the doctor.

"So risky," he replied, "that I thought I must be dreaming when I saw her. The comtesse had requested her husband to ring for her maid, whom she had asked, before my arrival, to prepare the very drink I had just advised her to take — and some seconds later the door opened.

"'Eulalie, where is the tisane I asked for?' said the comtesse impatiently.

"'Here it is, Madame,' replied a voice I seemed to recognize, and it had no sooner struck my ear than I saw emerge from the shadow that enveloped the greater part of the room, and advance into the circle of light thrown by the lamp around the bed, Hauteclair Stassin — yes,



Hauteclair herself! — holding in her beautiful hands a silver tray, on which steamed the bowl that the comtesse had asked for. Such a sight was enough to take my breath away! Eulalie!

“Fortunately, the name of Eulalie pronounced so naturally, told me all, and was like a blow with an ice hammer, restoring the coolness I was about to lose and enabling me to resume my passive attitude as doctor and observer.

“Hauteclair had become Eulalie, maid to the Comtesse de Savigny! Her disguise — if such a woman can be disguised — was complete. She wore the costume of the working-class girls of V—— and their head-dress resembling a helmet, and their long corkscrew curls falling on each side of their cheeks — those corkscrews which the preachers of those days called ‘serpents’ in order to try and disgust the pretty girls with them, which they never managed to do.

“And she was there, beneath it all, with her reserved beauty and lowered eyes, which only proves that those vipers of women can do whatever they like with their confounded bodies whenever it is in their interest to do so. Having recovered myself, like a man who bites his lips to prevent a cry of surprise escaping him, I had a desire to show this daring girl that I recognized her, and while the comtesse drank her potion and her face was hidden by the bowl, I fixed my eyes on Eulalie’s eyes, but hers — as mild as a fawn’s that evening — were firmer than those of the panther she had just stared down. She never blinked.

“The hands that held the platter trembled almost imperceptibly, but that was all. The comtesse drank very slowly, and when she had finished, said:

“‘All right! Take it away.’

“And Hauteclair-Eulalie took the tray and walked away with that bearing that I would have recognized among all the twenty thousand daughters of Ahasuerus. I admit that I did not look at the Comte de Savigny, for I felt what my look would mean at such a moment; but when I did venture to do so, I found his gaze fixed upon me, and his face turned from an expression of terrible anxiety to one of deliverance.

“He saw that *I knew*, but he saw also that *I did not intend to know*, and he breathed more freely. He was sure of my impenetrable discretion, which he explained probably (although I did not care about that) by my interest as a doctor in retaining such a good customer as he was, while really it was only the interest I took as an observer, who did not want the doors of a house where such interesting events were going on to be closed against him.

“So I returned with my finger on my lips, resolved not to breathe a



word to anyone about what no one even suspected. Ah, what pleasure it is to be an observer, what impersonal and solitary pleasures — I have always held these to be the best kind — I would be able to enjoy in this old château in the country, to which as a doctor I could come whenever I liked!

"Glad to be delivered from his anxiety, Savigny had said to me: 'Come every day, Doctor, until further orders.'

"I could therefore follow the development of this mysterious situation as though it were a disease, and which, if told to anyone, would have seemed impossible. And as, from the very first day, this mystery had aroused my ratiocinative faculties, which are the blind man's stick to the *scholar* and especially to the doctor in their curious researches, I began immediately to analyze the situation so I might understand it. How long had it existed? Did it date from the disappearance of Hauteclaire? That was more than a year ago. Had Hauteclaire Stassin been the Comtesse de Savigny's maid all that time? How was it that no one who came to the house had ever seen what I had seen so easily and so quickly? All these questions jumped on my horse with me and rode along to V——, accompanied by many others I picked up on the road.

"The Comte and Comtesse de Savigny, who were believed to adore each other, lived, it is true, far from all society. But still a visitor might drop in at the château at any time. It is true that if the visitor were a man, Hauteclaire need not appear; and if the visitor were a lady, the ladies of V—— had not seen (sufficiently to be able to recognize) a girl who hardly ventured out of the school of arms and who, when seen at a distance on horseback or in church, wore purposely a thick veil — for Hauteclaire (as I have said) had always possessed that pride of the very proud, who are offended at too much curiosity, and the more they are gazed at, the more they try to hide themselves. As for the servants of Monsieur de Savigny, with whom she was obliged to live, if they did not come from V—— — and perhaps even if they did — they would not know her.

"Thus did I reply, as I trotted along, to the first questions that suggested themselves, and, before I got out of the saddle, I had constructed a whole edifice of suppositions, more or less plausible, to explain what, to anyone but a reasoner like me, would have been inexplicable. Perhaps the only thing that I could not explain well was that the dazzling beauty of Hauteclaire had not been an obstacle to her entering the service of the Comtesse de Savigny, who loved her husband and might therefore be jealous. But the patrician ladies of V——, quite as proud as the wives of Charlemagne's paladins, could not suppose (a grave mis-



take, but they had never read *Le Mariage de Figaro*) that the prettiest lady's maid could be for their husbands any more than the handsomest lackey was to them — and so I ended by telling myself, as I took my foot out of the stirrup, that the Comtesse de Savigny had every reason to believe she was loved, and that rascal Savigny was quite capable of keeping up the illusion."

"Hmm!" I said skeptically — for I could not keep from interrupting — "all that is very fine, my dear Doctor, but the situation was a terribly imprudent one all the same."

"Certainly!" he replied. "But suppose the imprudence made the situation?" added this connoisseur of human nature. "There are some passions that are only excited by imprudence and that, without the dangers they provoke, would never exist. In the sixteenth century, as passionate a century as ever was, the most prolific cause of love was the danger of love. A man stood a chance of being stabbed as he left the arms of his mistress, or a husband put poison on his wife's sleeve, which you kissed and touched and caressed; and far from putting a stop to love, this incessant danger only aggravated it, ignited it, and rendered it irresistible! In our tame modern customs, where law has replaced passion, it is evident that the article of the code that applies to the husband who is guilty of having — as the law coarsely puts it — 'introduced a concubine into the conjugal domicile' is an ignoble danger enough, but for noble natures this danger, by the very fact that it is ignoble, seems all the more grand; and Savigny, in exposing himself to it, perhaps found the only anxious pleasure that really intoxicates strong minds."

"The next day, as you may imagine," continued Doctor Torty, "I was at the château early, but neither that day nor the following ones did I see anything but what was absolutely normal and regular. Neither on the part of the invalid, nor on that of the comte, nor even on that of the false Eulalie, who performed her duties as naturally as though she had been brought up to do them, did I remark anything that could give me information concerning the secret I had detected. What was certain was that the Comte de Savigny and Hauteclair Stassin were playing the most appallingly brazen comedy with all the ease of consummate actors and that they had agreed together to play it. But what was not so certain and what I wanted to know first was whether the comtesse was really their dupe and, if she was, whether it were possible that she be so for long."

"Therefore, I concentrated my attention on the comtesse. I had no trouble in seeing her, as she was my patient, and therefore, on account of her illness, the focus of my observations. She was, as I have told you,



a true lady of V——, knowing nothing but this — that she was noble, and that outside the nobility there was nothing worthy of regard. The appreciation of their nobility is the only passion of the women of V—— in the upper class — and in all classes the women of V—— are not very passionate. Mademoiselle Delphine de Cantor had been educated by the Benedictine nuns, and, having no religious vocation, she had been horribly bored and had left the nunnery to bore herself still more at home until she married the Comte de Savigny, whom she loved, or thought she loved, with all the readiness of bored young girls to love the first comer presented to them.

“She was a pale woman with soft flesh but hard bones and a milky complexion with specks of bran, for little freckles that were certainly darker than her hair, which was a very light red, covered her skin. When she stretched out her white arm, veined with opalescent blue, and a small aristocratic wrist, in which the pulse was normally languid, she seemed to have been born to be a victim — to be crushed under the feet of the haughty Hauteclaire, who had bowed down before her and become her servant.

“But this idea, which arose the first moment you looked at her, was contradicted by the jutting chin at the end of this thin face — a chin like that of Fulvia on the Roman medals, out of place at the bottom of this crumpled little face — and also by a forehead obstinately bulging under her colorless hair. It was a puzzle to express an opinion about her. At any rate, it was impossible that the present calm situation could last long without a terrible explosion. With a view to that future explosion, I set to work to listen to the heartbeat of this little woman, who could not long remain a secret to her doctor. He who confesses the body soon holds the heart. If there were moral or immoral causes for the comtesse's current sufferings, she might try to conceal her impressions and thoughts, but she would at last have to reveal them.

“That is what I said to myself; but I observed her beneath my doctor's lens in vain. It was evident to me, after some days, that she did not have the slightest suspicion of the complicity of her husband and Hauteclaire in the domestic crime of which her house was the silent and discreet theater. Was it a lack of sagacity on her part? Or the silencing of jealousy? She was somewhat aloof with everyone except her husband. With the false Eulalie who waited on her she was imperious but gentle. That sounds contradictory, but it is not. She gave her orders curtly, but she never raised her voice, like a woman made to be obeyed and sure of being obeyed — and she was, admirably. Eulalie, the terrifying Eulalie, had somehow insinuated herself into this household, and



enveloped her in attentions that stopped just short of being tiresome to their recipient, and everything was done with a readiness and a knowledge of the character of her mistress which was as much a result of will as of intelligence.

"I even went so far as to speak to the comtesse about Eulalie, whom I had seen move about so naturally when I paid my visits and the sight of whom gave me a chill up my back — as though I had seen a serpent uncoil and stealthily approach a sleeping woman. One day when the comtesse had sent her to fetch something or other and she had slipped out of the room quickly and noiselessly, I took advantage of the opportunity to ask a question that might enlighten me on the matter.

"What a velvety footfall!" I said, as I watched her leave. "You have a maid, Madame, who does her work well. May I ask where you found her? Does she come from V——?"

"Yes, she serves me very well," replied the comtesse with indifference, looking at herself in a little hand mirror framed in green velvet and surrounded by peacock's feathers, and speaking in that impertinent tone one has when one is utterly uninterested in what one is saying. "I am highly satisfied with her. She did not come from V——, but I could not tell you where she does come from — I know nothing about her. Ask Monsieur de Savigny if you want to know, Doctor, for he brought her to me soon after we were married. She had been in the service, he told me, of an old cousin of his who had died, and she could not find another place. I trusted in him, and I was not disappointed. She is a perfect maid. I do not believe she has a single fault."

"I know of one," I said with affected gravity.

"Ah! what is that?" she replied languidly, without any interest in what she was saying, and still attentively studying her pale lips in the little hand mirror.

"She is pretty," I said. "She is really much too pretty to be a maid. One of these days you will have someone run away with her."

"Do you think so?" she replied, still looking at herself and unconcerned with what I said.

"And perhaps it will be a man of your own station who will fall in love with her. She is pretty enough to turn the head of a duke."

"I weighed my words before uttering them, for I wanted to sound her out and see how much she knew — if she knew nothing, I could do no more.

"There is no duke at V——," replied the comtesse, and her forehead remained as polished as the glass she held in her hand. "Besides, all women of that sort," she added, smoothing an eyebrow, "leave you



when it suits them, and your affection for them does not stop them from doing so. Eulalie does her work well, but if I showed any affection for her she would, no doubt, abuse it, so I do nothing of the sort.'

"There was no further mention made of Eulalie that day. The comtesse was completely deceived. Who wouldn't have been, for that matter? Even I—who had recognized Hauteclairé at once, having seen her so many times with only a sword's length between us in her father's fencing school—was almost tempted at times to believe in Eulalie. Savigny was far less at ease in this lie, though he ought to have been more so, but she lived and moved in this atmosphere of deceit as easily and naturally as a fish in water. She must certainly have been in love, and very deeply in love, to do what she did, to have given up all the advantages of a life that flattered her vanity by making her the cynosure of all eyes in a little town—for her the whole universe—where sooner or later she might have found among the young men, her admirers and adorers, one who would marry her for love and take her into that good society of which she knew only the men. Her lover certainly staked less than she did. His devotion was less than hers. His pride, as a man, must have suffered greatly at not being able to spare his mistress the indignity of such a humiliating position. It seemed out of keeping with the impetuous character generally ascribed to Savigny. If he loved Hauteclairé enough to sacrifice his young wife for her, he might have gone to live with her in Italy—that was often done at that time—without all the abominations of a shameful and concealed concubinage. Was his love less than hers? Did he allow Hauteclairé to love him more than he loved her? Was it she who had forced her way into the conjugal domicile? And did he, finding the experience daring and exciting, allow himself to be tempted by this new incarnation of Potiphar's wife?

"What I saw did not teach me much concerning Savigny and Hauteclairé. Accomplices in adultery of some sort they certainly were—but what were the emotions at the bottom of this adultery? What was the position of these two persons in regard to one another? This was the unknown factor in this algebraic equation I wanted to solve. Savigny's conduct toward his wife was irreproachable, but when Hauteclairé-Eulalie was there, I could see, out of the corner of my eye, certain precautions that denoted that his mind was not at ease. When in the course of my daily visits he asked for a book or a paper or some other article, he had a way of taking it from the hands of the maid which would have revealed his secret to any other woman but this little schoolgirl, brought up by the Benedictine nuns, whom he had married. You could see he was afraid lest his hand should touch that of Hauteclairé, as though, if



he did by chance touch it, it would have been impossible not to take it. Hauteclairé did not display this embarrassment and these precautions.

"Women are all temptresses who would tempt God in his heaven, if there were one, or the devil in his hell, and she seemed to want to provoke desire and danger at the same time.

"I saw this once or twice at dinner, which Savigny piously took by his wife's bedside.

"Hauteclairé waited at table, as the other servants never entered the comtesse's apartment. To place the dishes on the table, she was obliged to lean over Savigny's shoulder, and, in doing so, I saw her rub her bodice against his neck and ears — and I noticed that the comte turned completely pale and glanced at his wife to see if she were looking. By Jove! I was young then, and the disturbance of the molecules in the organization, which is called the violence of emotion, seemed to me the only thing worth living for. I thought to myself that it must be incredibly pleasurable to enjoy a mysterious concubinage with a sham servant, under the eyes of a wife who might guess the truth. Yes, concubinage in the conjugal household, it was then that I understood it!

"But, except for the paleness and the repressed trances of Savigny, I saw nothing of the romance they were playing and only the inevitable drama and catastrophe. What were they doing? I wanted to learn their secret. It seized me like the sphinx's riddle and became so consuming that from observing I took to spying, which is only observation at any price. Ah, our tastes soon deprave us. To find out what I did not know, I allowed myself to commit vile little acts that were beneath me and that I knew to be so and nevertheless performed. It is the being accustomed to the probe, my dear fellow. I probed everywhere. When, in my visits to the château, I put my horse in the stable, I questioned the servants — without appearing to do so, of course. I spied — oh, I won't spare to use the word — solely for my own curiosity. But the servants were as deceived as the comtesse.

"They honestly took Hauteclairé for one of their own, and all my curiosity would have been wasted had it not been for chance, which, as usual, did more than all my schemes and taught me more than all my spying.

"For more than two months I had been attending the comtesse, whose health did not improve, for she showed more and more all the symptoms of that debility that is so common now and that the medical men of this enervated age call anemia. Savigny and Hauteclairé continued to play with the same consummate art the difficult comedy that my arrival at the château had not disconcerted. Nevertheless, it seemed



to me that the actors were getting tired. Savigny had grown thin, and I heard it said at V——: 'What a good husband Monsieur de Savigny is! He has changed since his wife's illness. How nice it must be to be loved like that!'

"Hauteclair's beauty was unchanged, though she had dark circles under her eyes — not the circles one gets from weeping, for she had probably never cried in all her life, but those one gets from staying up all night — yet her eyes shone as ardently as ever from the midst of their violet rings. The leanness of Savigny, and Hauteclair's shadows, might have been due to some other cause than the life they were leading. It might have been due to many things in that land of subterranean volcanoes!

"I had noticed these tell-tale signs on their faces and had asked myself the meaning without being able to give a reply, when one day, returning from my rounds, I passed by Savigny. My intention had been to call as usual, but a country woman's difficult childbirth had kept me very late, and when I passed the château it was too late for a visit. I did not even know what time it was. My hunting watch had stopped. But the moon, which had already begun to descend, marked a little after midnight on the vast blue dial, and the lower point of its crescent almost touched the tops of the fir trees of Savigny, behind which it would soon disappear.

"Have you ever been to Savigny?" asked the doctor, breaking off his story and turning to me. I nodded.

"Yes? Well, then you know that you are obliged to pass through the woods and along the walls of the château, which you must double like a cape, in order to get to the high road that leads directly to V——. Suddenly, in these thick woods, in which you cannot see a ray of light, nor hear the slightest sound, there fell on my ears a noise I took to be that of beating clothes — some poor woman, I thought, who was occupied all day in the fields had taken advantage of the moonlight to wash her clothes at some washtub or ditch. It was only as I neared the château that with these regular beats there mingled another sound that enlightened me as to the nature of the first. It was the clashing of crossed swords. You know how you can hear everything in the clear night air, when the least sounds become distinct; there was no mistake about this being the sound of iron on iron. An idea crossed my mind, and when I emerged from the pines before the château, bathed in the moonlight, with one of its windows open, I said, admiring the force of habit:

"So! This is how they make love!"

"It was evident that Savigny and Hauteclair were fencing, at that



hour of the night. I could hear the foils as plainly as though I had seen them. What I had taken for the noise of beating clothes was the stamping of the fencers' feet. The window was open in the pavilion that was the farthest, of all the four, from the bedroom of the comtesse. The sleeping château, dreary and white beneath the moon, looked dead. All the rest of the house was silent and dark, but from this one room, its Venetian shutters half-closed and streaked with light, the noise of the clashing of foils proceeded. As the night was warm—it was in July—they had opened the window behind the shutters, which led onto the balcony.

“I had drawn up my horse at the edge of the woods to listen to their parrying, which appeared to be a lively one, and I was interested in this assault at arms between lovers who had first loved with weapons in their hands and who continued to love one another thus, when the click of the foils ceased.

“The shutters were pushed open, and I only just had time to back my horse into the shadow of the trees when Savigny and Hauteclair came out and leaned over the iron rail of the balcony. I could see them wonderfully well. The moon had fallen below the wood, but the light of a candelabrum in the room behind them outlined their figures. Hauteclair was dressed—if it may be called dressed—as I had seen her so often when giving her lessons at V——, in a chamois jacket that fit like a breastplate and in the tightly fitting silk breeches that showed all the muscular contour of her legs. Savigny wore a similar costume. Both were lithe and robust, and they looked, in the lighted square of the window, like two beautiful statues of Youth and Strength. You have just admired, in this garden, the proud beauty of both, which time has not yet destroyed. Well, that will help give you an idea of the magnificent couple I perceived on the balcony, their tightly fitting clothes making them seem naked. They were leaning on the balcony and talking, but so low that I could not hear what they said; but their attitude told me enough. Savigny had thrown one arm around that Amazonian waist, which seemed quite able to resist—but did nothing of the kind.

“And at the same instant the proud Hauteclair threw her arms round Savigny's neck, and they thus formed the famous and voluptuous sculpture by Canova, which everyone recollects, and thus they remained mouth to mouth long enough to drink a whole bottleful of kisses. That lasted for sixty beats of my pulse, which went faster than at present and which this sight caused to beat even faster still.

“‘Oh! Oh!’ I said to myself when they had gone back into the room, still entwined, and closed the heavy curtains, and I had emerged from



my hiding place. 'One of these days they will have to confide in me. It will not be only themselves they will have to hide!' From the sight of their caresses and this intimacy, I deduced, as a doctor would, the consequences. But their ardor would defeat my prophecy. You know there are persons who love too much" — the cynical old doctor used another word — "and consequently do not have children.

"The next morning I went to Savigny. I found Hauteclaire, now become Eulalie again, seated in the embrasure of one of the windows of the long corridor that led to her mistress's room, with a quantity of linen and cloth before her and which she was engaged in cutting and mending — she, the fencer of the previous night. Could anyone suspect it? I thought, as I noticed that graceful form that I had seen almost bare the previous night, framed in light on the balcony, which not even the petticoat and the white apron could altogether hide.

"I passed her without speaking, for I spoke to her as little as possible, not wishing to seem to know what I did, and which might have been remarked in my voice or look. I felt I was not such an actor as she, and I distrusted myself.

"Generally when I passed along this corridor, where she always worked when she was not attending to the comtesse, she heard me coming and was so certain as to who it was that she never raised her head. She remained bent over under her starched cap or the Normandy head-dress she sometimes wore, which resembled that of Isabella of Bavaria, and with her eyes on her work and her cheeks hidden by the blue-black corkscrew curls that framed her pale oval face, offering to my gaze only a gracefully curved neck, covered by thick curls that twisted and writhed like the desires they aroused. In Hauteclaire, it was wildness that was superb. No other woman had the same kind of beauty. Men, who say everything when alone together, had often remarked it. At V——, when she gave her fencing lessons, the men used to call her, between themselves, Mademoiselle Esau. The devil teaches women what they are — or they would teach it to the devil if he did not know.

"Though not much of a coquette, Hauteclaire had a habit, when she was listening to someone, of rolling around her fingers the long curls at the back of her neck, which had rebelled against the comb that smoothed her chignon. One of these curls was sufficient to trouble the soul, as the Bible says. She knew well the effect this game had. But now that she was a maid, I had never once seen her indulge in this gesture of power playing with fire, even when looking at Savigny.

"My parenthesis has been rather long, my dear fellow, but anything which enables you to understand Hauteclaire Stassin is of importance



to my story. On that day she was obliged to rise and show her face, for the comtesse rang and ordered her to bring me pen and paper, which I needed to write out a prescription. She came, with a steel thimble still on her finger, which she had not bothered to take off, and she had stuck the threaded needle in her tempting breast, where there were already many others embellishing her neckline. Even these steel needles suited this confounded girl, who was made for steel, and who in the Middle Ages would have worn a breastplate. She remained standing before me while I wrote, offering me the writing case with the noble movement that one acquires with fencing and that she had acquired more than anyone.

"When I had finished, I raised my eyes and looked at her so as not to affect anything and saw in her face the fatigue of the previous night.

"Savigny, who was not there when I arrived, suddenly appeared. He looked much more fatigued than she did. He spoke to me about the health of the comtesse, who was no better. He seemed impatient and annoyed that this was so. His tone was bitter, violent, and contracted. He walked to and fro as he spoke. I looked at him coolly, thinking he was overdoing it and that this Napoleonic tone with me was rather unseemly. 'But if I should cure your wife,' I thought to myself, 'you would not be able to practice fencing — and love-making — all night with your mistress.' I could have recalled him to the reality and politeness he had forgotten, by putting under his nose — if I had so liked — the smelling salts of a sharp reply. I contented myself with looking at him. He was more interesting to me than ever, for it was evident that he was acting a part more than ever."

The doctor stopped again. He plunged his big finger and thumb into his silver snuff box and took a pinch of rappee (which he pompously called his tobacco). He, in his turn, appeared so interesting to me that I made no remark, and he continued his story, after having taken his pinch and passed his bent finger over his beaklike nose.

"Oh, he was really impatient — but it was not because his wife, to whom he was so persistently unfaithful, was not getting well. Confound it! A man carrying on with a servant in his own house could scarcely be angry that his wife's health was not improving. If she had been cured, would his adultery not have been more difficult?

"But it was true that this illness was dragging on and exhausting him, exasperating him. Did he think it would take less time? And if, as I have since thought, the idea of ending it came to him or to her, or to both of them — since neither the disease nor the doctor was ending it — it was perhaps, at that moment."



"What, Doctor! Then they ———?"

I did not finish my sentence; the idea that the doctor had suggested cut short my words.

He bent his head and looked at me as tragically as the statue of the commander when he dines.

"Yes!" he said slowly in a low voice, in answer to my thought. "At least, a few days later, everybody was horrified to learn that the comtesse had died of poisoning."

"Poisoning!" I cried.

"By her maid, Eulalie, who had mistaken one bottle for another and given her mistress some copying ink instead of a medicine I had prescribed. After all, such a mistake was possible. But I knew that Eulalie was Hauteclaire. I had seen them both forming Canova's sculpture on the balcony. Society had not seen what I had seen. Society was at first under the impression that a terrible accident had occurred. But when, two years after this catastrophe, they learned that Comte Serlon de Savigny had publicly married Stassin's daughter — for the secret had to come out as to who the sham Eulalie was — and that she would sleep in the still-warm sheets of the comte's first wife, Mademoiselle Delphine de Cantor, oh, then suspicion rumbled through the town, in low voices, as though people were afraid of what they said and thought. But, in reality, no one knew. They knew about his marriage, which caused the Comte de Savigny to be pointed at and shunned as though he had the plague. That was quite enough, though. You know what a disgrace it is — or rather it was, for things have much changed in this country — to say of a man: 'He has married his servant!' That disgrace rested on him like a stain. As to the horrible rumors of a suspected crime, they were buzzed about, and died away like a horsefly in a rut. But there was one person, however, who knew and was sure."

"And that must have been you, Doctor!" I interrupted.

"It was I, as a matter of fact," he continued, "but not I alone. If I alone had known it, I should never have had but vague glimmerings of the truth that would have been worse than ignorance. I should never have been certain, and," he said, stressing the absolute certainty on each word, "*I am!*"

"And listen to how it is that I am!" he added, gripping my knee with his gnarled fingers. His story gripped me even more than the crablike claws of his strong hand.

"You may well suppose," he continued, "that I was the first to hear that the comtesse had been poisoned. Whether they were guilty or not, they were obliged to send for the family doctor. They did not stop to



have a horse saddled. A stable boy came at full gallop, riding bareback to find me in V——, and I followed him at the same pace to Savigny. When I arrived — had that been calculated? — it was not possible to stop the ravages of the poison. Serlon, his face grief-stricken, met me in the courtyard and, as I got out of the saddle, said, as though he were frightened of his own words:

“‘A servant made a mistake.’ (He took care not to say Eulalie, whom everybody named the next day.) ‘But, Doctor, can it be possible that copying ink is a poison?’

“‘That depends on what it is made of,’ I replied.

“He took me to the comtesse, who was exhausted with pain and whose contracted face resembled a ball of white thread that had fallen into some green dye.

“She looked awful. She smiled at me horribly with her black lips and with that kind of smile that seems to say: ‘I know well what you think.’ I glanced quickly around the room to see if Eulalie was there. I should have liked to have seen her face at that moment. She was not there.

“Brave as she was, was she afraid of me? Ah, at that time, I still was not certain.

“The comtesse made an effort when she saw me, and raised herself on her elbow.

“‘Ah, there you are, Doctor,’ she said; ‘but you come too late. I am dead. It is not the doctor you should have sent for, Serlon, but the priest. Send for him at once, and leave me alone for two minutes with the doctor. I wish it.’

“She said that ‘I wish it’ as I had never heard her speak before — but like a woman who had that chin and forehead I have mentioned.

“‘Even me?’ said Savigny, feebly.

“‘Even you,’ she replied. And she added, almost caressingly, ‘You know, my dear, that women are sometimes too modest to speak before those they love.’

“Hardly had he left than an atrocious change came over her. She went from sweet to ferocious.

“‘Doctor,’ she said in a voice that teemed with hate, ‘my death is not an accident, it is a crime! Serlon loves Eulalie, and she has poisoned me! I did not believe you when you told me that girl was too beautiful to be a maid. I was wrong. He loves that wretch, that abominable woman who has killed me. He is more guilty than she is, for he loves her and has betrayed me for her. For the past few days, the looks they exchanged across my bed have warned me. And then the horrible taste of that ink with which they poisoned me! But I drank it all to the last



drop, in spite of the horrible taste, because I was glad to die. Don't talk about antidotes. I want none of your remedies. I want to die.'

"Then why did you send for me, Madame la Comtesse?"

"Well, this is why,' she replied breathlessly. 'To tell you that they have poisoned me and that you should give me your word of honor to keep the secret. It would make a terrible scandal. That must not be, you are my doctor, and people will believe you when you speak of this mistake they have invented — when you say that I should not have died but might have been saved, if my health had not been so bad for a long time past. That is what you must swear, Doctor.'

"As I did not reply, she saw what was passing in my mind. I thought she loved her husband to such an extent that she wished to save him. That was the idea that occurred in my mind — a natural and vulgar idea, for there are some women so intended for love and all its self-denials that they would not return the blow that killed them. But the Comtesse de Savigny had never appeared to me to be a woman of that sort.

"Oh, it is not what you imagine that makes me ask you to swear that, Doctor. Oh, no! I hate Serlon too much at this moment to not still love him despite his betrayal. But I am not such a coward as to forgive him! I will leave this life jealous of him and implacable. But this does not concern Serlon, Doctor,' she continued with energy, showing me a side of her character of which I had already caught a glimpse but the depths of which I had not penetrated. 'It concerns the Comte de Savigny. I do not want it to be known, when I am dead, that the Comte de Savigny murdered his wife. I do not want him tried in court and accused of complicity with a servant who is an adulteress and a poisoner. I do not want that stain to rest on the name of Savigny, which I bore. Oh, if it were only a question of him, he would be worthy of the scaffold. I should like to torture him. But it concerns all of us, the aristocracy of the country. If we were still what we ought to be, I should have thrown Eulalie into one of the dungeons of the château of Savigny and there would have been no more said about her. But we are no longer masters in our own houses. We have no longer our expeditious and silent justice, and on no account would I have the scandal and publicity of yours, Doctor; and I prefer to leave them in each other's arms, happy, and freed from me, and for me to die as I am dying, enraged, than to think when I am dying that the nobility of V—— should have the disgrace of counting a poisoner in its ranks.'

"She spoke with extraordinary resonance, despite the staccato quivering of her jaw and the clattering of her teeth. The aristocrat was stronger in her than the jealous wife. She would die as befitted a daugh-



ter of V——, the last aristocratic town in France. And, touched by that — perhaps more than I ought to have been — I promised and swore that if I could not save her, I would do what she asked.

“And I have done so, my dear fellow. I did not save her. I could not save her; she obstinately refused to take any remedy. I said what she wished me to say when she was dead, and I was believed.

“That was twenty-five years ago. At present everything concerning the dreadful affair has been silenced and forgotten. Most of her contemporaries are dead. Other generations — ignorant or indifferent — are drifting toward their tombs, and you are the first to have heard this sinister story.

“And if it had not been for what we have seen, I should not have told you now. It needed those two beings, unchangeably beautiful in spite of time, unchangeably happy in spite of their crime, powerful, passionate, absorbed in each other, passing through life as gracefully as through this garden, like two angels united in the golden shadow of their four wings.”

I was horrified. “But,” I said, “if what you tell me is true, the happiness of these people is a terrible disorder of nature.”

“It is disorder, or it is order, whichever you please,” replied Doctor Torty, a confirmed atheist, and as untroubled as the persons of whom he was speaking, “but it is a fact. They are exceptionally happy; insolently happy. I am an old man, and I have seen, in the course of my life, much happiness that did not last, but I have only seen that one that was so profound and still endures.

“And you may believe that I have studied and scrutinized it. I have sought for a rift in their happiness. If you will excuse the expression, I may say that I have loused it. I have searched the life of those two beings to see if there was not, in their astonishing and revolting happiness, a flaw or crack, however small, in some secret place, but I have never found anything but an excellent and successful joke of the devil’s against God, if there be a God or a devil.

“After the death of the comtesse, I remained, as you may imagine, on good terms with Savigny. As I had lent the weight of my authority to the fable they had devised to explain the poisoning, they had no interest in casting me aside, and I had a great interest in knowing what would follow, what they would do, and what would become of them. I was impatient to know, but I endured my impatience. What followed was Savigny’s mourning, which lasted the customary two years and which Savigny performed in a manner to confirm the public idea that he was the most excellent of husbands, past, present, or future.



"During these two years, he saw absolutely no one. He buried himself in his château in such solitude that no one knew that he had kept Eulalie at Savigny, the involuntary cause of the death of the comtesse, and whom he ought in common decency to have got rid of, even if he had been sure of her innocence.

"The imprudence of keeping such a woman in his house after such a catastrophe showed the senseless passion that I had always suspected in Serlon. Therefore I was not at all surprised when one day, on returning from my rounds, I met one of the servants on the road near Savigny, and on asking what was going on at the château was told that Eulalie *was still there*. By the indifferent tone in which he said that, I saw that none of the comte's servants suspected that Eulalie was his mistress. 'They are playing a close game,' I said to myself. 'But why do they not leave the country? The comte is rich. He could live grandly anywhere. Why not run away with this beautiful she-devil (as far as she-devils, I did believe in that one) who preferred to live in her lover's house, in spite of the danger, than to be his mistress at V——, in some quiet lodging where he could come and see her secretly?' There was something underneath all this I could not understand. Their infatuation, their delirium with each other, was then so consuming that they forgot all prudence and precaution? Did Hauteclair, who I assumed had a stronger character than Serlon, and whom I considered to be the man of the couple, want to remain in the château where she had been a servant and where she would become mistress, and, if that caused any scandal, prepare public opinion for a yet greater scandal — her marriage with the Comte de Savigny? That idea had not occurred to me, if it had occurred to her at that point of my story. Hauteclair Stassin, the daughter of the fencing master, Old Straight-Thrust, whom we had all seen giving lessons at V—— and lunging in tight pants, Comtesse de Savigny! Impossible! Who would have imagined this turn of events? As far as I was concerned, I believed that the concubinage would indeed continue between these two fierce animals, who had recognized at first glance that they were of the same species and had dared to commit adultery under the eyes of the comtesse.

"But a marriage impudently accomplished in the face of God and man — in defiance of outraged public opinion — I was, upon my word, a thousand miles from imagining such a thing, and when, after the two years' mourning, the event occurred, I was quite as much surprised as any of those idiots who never expect anything and then howl like whipped dogs in the night.

"Moreover, I did not go to Savigny much during the two years of



mourning that Serlon observed so strictly and that — when people saw what the end was — was criticized so furiously as hypocritical and base. What should I have done there? They were both in good health, and until the moment, perhaps not so far off, when they would send for me in the night to deliver a baby (which would require concealing also), they had no need of my services. Nevertheless, in the meantime I ventured a visit to the comte. Politeness mingled with eternal curiosity. Serlon received me wherever he might be when I arrived. He did not show the least embarrassment. His kind manner had returned. He was grave. I have remarked that happy people are grave. They carry their heart like a full glass that the least movement might cause to overflow or break. In spite of his gravity and his black clothes, there was in Serlon's eyes an unmistakable expression of immense happiness. It was no longer an expression of relief and deliverance, as on the day when he saw I had recognized Hauteclairie but had determined *not* to recognize her. No, *parbleu!* It was really and truly happiness. Although in these ceremonious and short visits we talked only about superficial matters, his voice was not as it had been in the time of his wife. Its intonation seemed to reveal the emotions that he felt obliged to restrain.

"As for Hauteclairie (still Eulalie, and at the château, as the servant had told me), it was a long time before I met her. I no longer passed her in the corridor, working in the window seat, as in the days of the comtesse. And yet the pile of linen in the same place, and the scissors, case, and thimble on the window sill showed that she still worked there, on that chair empty now, and perhaps warm, which she had left when she heard me coming. You will remember that I was conceited enough to believe that she was afraid to meet my eye, but at present she had nothing to fear. She was not aware that the comtesse had related that terrible secret to me. Such was her bold, proud nature that she would even have braved anyone sagacious enough to divine her secret. And, in fact, when I did see her, her happiness was written on her face in such a radiant manner that you could not have effaced it if you had poured over it all the bottle of copying ink with which she had poisoned the comtesse.

"It was on the grand staircase of the château that I met her the first time. She was coming down as I was going up. She was gliding along rather quickly, but when she saw me she slowed down, no doubt with the intention of showing me her face and looking me full in the eyes — but if she could make panthers close their eyes, she could not make me close mine. As she came down the staircase, her skirt floated behind her, owing to her rapid movement, and she seemed to have descended



from heaven. She had a sublimely happy air. It was fifteen thousand leagues above that of Serlon. I passed her, nevertheless, without any signs of politeness, for if Louis XIV saluted the chambermaids when he met them on the stairs, at least they were not poisoners. She was still dressed as a maid, with a white apron; but the happy air of the most triumphant and despotic mistress had replaced the impassiveness of the slave. That air she has never lost. I have just seen it again, and you can judge for yourself. It is even more striking than the beauty of the face upon which it shines. That superhuman air of pride in happy love, which she has bestowed upon Serlon, who did not have it at first, she continues after twenty years to have still, and I have never seen it diminished or veiled for an instant on the faces of these two privileged beings. By that air they have always been able to reply victoriously to neglect, slander, and scorn, and it has caused all those who have met them to believe that the crime of which they were suspected for a short time, was an atrocious calumny."

"But you, Doctor," I interrupted, "after all that you know, you cannot allow yourself to be impressed by that appearance? You have followed them around everywhere, have you not? You have seen them at all times?"

"Except in their bedroom at night, and it is not there that they would lose it," replied Doctor Torty, jokingly, but wisely. "I have seen them, I believe, at all times of their life since their marriage — which took place I know not where, in order not to face the hullabaloo that the populace of V——, quite as furious in its own way as the nobility in theirs, had resolved to give them. When they came back married and she was properly and authentically the Comtesse de Savigny and he absolutely disgraced by marrying a servant, they were left alone at their château in Savigny. People turned their backs on them. They were left to revel in each other as much as they wanted. But they have never wearied of each other; even now their hunger for each other is not appeased. As a doctor, I do not wish to die before I have written a treatise on teratology, and since they interest me — as strange monsters — I have not followed those who avoid them. When I saw the sham Eulalie completely a countess, she received me as though she had been one all her life. She was well aware that I remembered the white apron and the silver platter.

"‘I am no longer Eulalie,’ she said. ‘I am Hauteclair, happy to have been his servant.’

"I thought she had been something else as well; but as I was the only person in the district who went to Savigny when they returned there,



I swallowed my pride and ended up going there often. I may say I continued to strive to pierce the intimacy of these two beings, so completely happy in their love. Well, you may believe me or not, my dear fellow, but I have never seen the purity of that happiness (though soiled by a crime) tarnished or even clouded for a single minute in a single day. The stain of a cowardly crime, which had not the courage to be a bloody one, had never once sullied the blue horizon of their happiness. That is enough to knock over all the moralists on earth — is it not? — who have invented the lovely axiom of vice punished and virtue rewarded.

“Abandoned and alone as they were, and seeing no one but me, who had almost become a friend to them, after all their obsessive fear they were no longer on their guard. They forgot me, and, when I was present, lived in the intoxication of a passion to which I have seen nothing to compare in all my life. You witnessed it a moment ago. They passed, and they did not even see me, although I was standing right here! A good part of the time I spent with them, they never saw me either. Polite and amiable, but often absentminded, their behavior toward me was such that I should never have returned to Savigny had I not wanted to study microscopically their incredible happiness and to discover, for my personal edification, the grain of weariness, of suffering, or — if I must speak plainly — of remorse. But there was nothing! Nothing! Love pervaded everything and obscured their moral sense and what you call conscience, and when I looked at these happy beings, I understood the seriousness of the joke of my old comrade Broussais when he said about conscience: ‘I have been dissecting for thirty years and have never found a trace of that little beast.’

“And do not imagine,” continued the sarcastic old doctor, as though he had read my thoughts, “that what I am telling you is a thesis — the proof of a doctrine that I believe to be true and that denies the existence of conscience as Broussais denied it. There is no thesis here. I do not intend to sway your opinion. These are just facts, which astonished me as much as they do you. This is merely the phenomenon of continued happiness — a soap bubble that got bigger and never burst. When happiness lasts, it is already surprising, but happiness in crime is astounding, and in twenty years I have never gotten over my astonishment. The old doctor, the old observer, the old moralist — or immoralist (he added, seeing me smile) — is disconcerted by this spectacle that he has beheld so many years and that he cannot relate in detail, for, as is well said, happiness has no story.

“It cannot be described. You can no more paint happiness — that infusion of a higher life into ordinary life — than you can paint the circu-



lation of blood in the veins. You can certify by the beating of the arteries that it *does* circulate; and, by the same reasoning, I can certify the happiness of those incomprehensible beings, whose pulse I have been taking for so many years. The Comte and Comtesse de Savigny, without knowing it, re-create every day that splendid chapter in Madame de Staël, "Love in Marriage," or the still more magnificent verses of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. For my own part, I have never been very sentimental or very poetic, but the ideal they have realized, and which I deemed impossible, has disgusted me with the best marriages I have known, and which the world calls charming. I have always found these so inferior to theirs — so colorless and cold. Destiny, or their star, or chance — whatever it may be — has decreed that they shall live for themselves alone. Being rich, they have that idleness without which love cannot exist but which often kills the love from which it necessarily springs. But their case is an exception, and idleness has not killed theirs. Love, which simplifies everything, has made their life a sublime simplification. There are none of those important matters that are called events in the existence of those two married people, who have lived, apparently, like most lords and ladies of the manor; far from a world of which they ask nothing, caring nothing for its esteem or its disdain.

"They have never left one another. Where one goes, the other goes. The roads around V—— again see Hauteclaire on horseback, as in the time of Old Straight-Thrust; but it is the Comte de Savigny who is with her, and the ladies of the district, when they pass in their carriages, now stare at her more, perhaps, than when she was the tall and mysterious young girl in the dark blue veil, whom they could not see. Now she raises her veil, and boldly shows the face of the servant who successfully wed, and the ladies return home indignant, but musing.

"The Comte and Comtesse de Savigny never travel; they sometimes come to Paris, but they stay only a few days. Their life is concentrated entirely in the château of Savigny, which was the theater of a crime, of which they have perhaps forgotten the memory in the bottomless abyss of their hearts."

"Have they never had any children, Doctor?" I asked.

"Ah!" said Doctor Torty. "You fancy perhaps that that is their curse — the revenge of Fate — what you call the vengeance or the justice of God! No, they have never had any children. I once thought they would never have any. They love one another too much. The fire that devours, consumes, and does not produce. One day I said to Hauteclaire:

"'Are you not sorry not to have any children, Madame la Comtesse?'

"'I do not want any,' she said proudly. 'I should love Serlon less.



Children,' she added with a kind of scorn, 'are only good for unhappy women.'"

And Doctor Torty finished his story abruptly with this remark, which he deemed profound.

He had held my interest, and I said:

"Criminal as she may be, I am interested in this Hauteclaire. Had it not been for her crime, I should have understood Serlon's love."

"And, perhaps, even with her crime," said the doctor. "As, indeed, I do," he added boldly.

## BENEATH THE CARDS OF A GAME OF WHIST

*"Are you making fun of us, sir, with such a story?"*

*"Is there not, madam, a sort of tulle called illusion tulle?"*

*(At a party at Prince T——'s)*

### I

ONE EVENING LAST summer I was at the Baronne de Mascranny's, one of the women of Paris who adores wit as we used to know it, and is always ready to open her double doors — though a single door would suffice — to the little that is still spared us. Hasn't wit been entirely superseded these days by a pretentious beast called Intelligence? The Baronne de Mascranny is, on her husband's side, of an ancient and illustrious family, originally hailing from the Grisons. Her coat of arms, as all the world knows, bears at its center an azure escutcheon in the shape of a golden fleur-de-lis, and a three-barred gules: a silver spread eagle on the main gules, flanked on the right by a silver key, and on the left, by a silver helmet were augmentations of honor that had been granted by more than one European sovereign to the family of Mascranny in recompense for services rendered them by its members at different periods of history. If the sovereigns of Europe weren't quite so busy these days, they could add another ornament to a shield, already so nobly filled, in recognition of the heroic pains the baroness lavishes on the expiring art of conversation, that doomed child of aristocratic leisure and monarchic absolutism.

With the wit and manners of her name, the Baronne de Mascranny has made her drawing room into a kind of delectable Coblenz, a refuge for the elegant conversation of days gone by, the last glory of French wit, forced to emigrate by the busy, utilitarian habits of the age. There



each evening, until it falls silent altogether, wit divinely sings its swan song. There, and in the few other Parisian houses where the great traditions of good talk are preserved, pretentious phrases are eschewed, and monologue is almost unheard of. There nothing recalls the newspaper article or the political speech, those two vulgar molds of nineteenth-century thought. Wit is content to sparkle in sentences that may be charming or profound but never long; often a mere intonation of the voice suffices, or a trifling gesture that is a work of genius in itself. Thanks to this blessed *salon*, I have learned to appreciate the power of the monosyllable, a power I had hardly suspected before. How often have I heard one hurled or merely dropped into the conversation, with a skill that far exceeded that of Mlle Mars, the queen of monosyllable on the stage but whom the Faubourg Saint-Germain would have nimbly dethroned had she ever appeared on *that* stage; for the women there are far too grand when they are being witty to *refine refined gold*, like an actress in a play by Marivaux.

Well, on this particular evening, by way of exception, there were no monosyllables in the air. When I entered the Baronne de Mascranny's drawing room, a number of people were there whom she calls *her close friends*, and the conversation was as animated as always. Like the exotic flowers filling the jasper vases on her tables, the baroness's close friends hail from all parts of the world. Among them are English, Poles, Russians — though all are French in speech and by virtue of that quality of mind and manners that is the same everywhere at a certain level of society. I cannot tell what had been the original starting point; but when I entered, they were discussing novels. For them *to discuss novels* meant only that each was busy dissecting his or her own life. For it is needless to remark that in a gathering such as this of men and women of society, no one was so pedantic as to broach the literary aspect of the question. Content, not form, was what concerned them most. Each of these high-bred moralists, these practitioners of love and life, whose light remarks and detached airs hid many a passionate experience, saw in the novel but a question of human nature, history, and manners. Nothing more. But then is this not everything?

Apparently they must already have talked a great deal about the subject, for they all had that intense expression on their faces of interest long stimulated. Delicately whipped by each other, all these minds were frothing. Only some intense souls — I could count three or four in the room — sat silent, some with heads lowered, some with eyes fixed dreamily on the rings of a hand that lay extended on their knee. Perhaps they were trying to corporealize their daydreams, which is as dif-



ficult as to spiritualize one's sensations. Under cover of the discussion, I slipped in unperceived behind the dazzling, velvety back of the beautiful Comtesse de Damnaglia, who was biting between her lips the tip of her closed fan as she listened attentively — as all did in this assemblage, where listening is a fine art. The day was declining, a day of rosy light now verging into darkness, as happy lives do. The company formed a circle in the dusky half-light of the salon, resembling a garland of men and women, variously posed and casually attentive. They made a sort of living bracelet of which the mistress of the house, with her Egyptian profile, and the couch she always occupied, like Cleopatra, formed the clasp. An open window showed a bit of sky and the balcony where some of the guests were standing, and the air was so clear and the quai d'Orsay so profoundly quiet at that moment, that these people did not lose one syllable of the voice in the salon, despite the Venetian draperies of the window that would have smothered this sonorous voice and held its vibrations in their folds. When I recognized the speaker, I ceased to wonder at the attention he was accorded — which was not bestowed out of politeness — or at the audacity of his holding forth longer than was usual in this exquisite salon.

He was, in fact, the most brilliant talker in this kingdom of brilliant talk. I will not divulge his name — but that is his title! Actually, he had another. Scandal and slander, those twin Menaechmi that are so much alike one can barely tell them apart and that write their gossip sheet backward, as if it were in Hebrew (isn't it often?), offered scathing reports that he had been the hero of more than one adventure he would scarcely have cared to tell that night.

"The finest stories in life," he was saying, when I settled myself among the sofa cushions, sheltered by the Comtesse de Damnaglia's shoulders, "are realities one has touched with the elbow, or even the foot, in passing. We have all seen them; the novel is commoner than history. I am not now speaking of those that were glaring catastrophes, dramas staged with the fine audacity of much high-flown sentiment and flaunted in the dignified face of Public Opinion. Quite apart from these scandals, which after all are infrequent in a society like our own, which yesterday was hypocritical but today is merely timid, there is not one among us who has not witnessed those mysterious workings of sentiment or passion that blast a whole career to ruin, breaking hearts that give out only a dull sound, like that of a corpse dropped into the hidden depths of a dungeon and over which the world exclaims or remains silent. We may often say of romance what Molière used to say of virtue: 'Where the devil will it nestle itself next?' Where you least expect



to find it, lo! there it is. As a child, I myself saw — no! *saw* is not the word! — I guessed, I divined, one of those cruel, terrible dramas that are never played out in public, though the public sees the actors every day — one of those *bloody comedies*, as Pascal said, but performed behind closed doors, behind a stage cloth — the curtain of privacy and intimacy. What emerges from these hidden, stifled dramas, dramas I would describe as *suppressed sweat*, is more sinister and produces a more poignant effect on the imagination and memory than if the whole action had unfolded under our very eyes. The unknown multiplies the impression of the known a hundredfold. Am I mistaken? Would not hell glimpsed through some small window be far more terrifying than if beheld in its entirety in a single sweeping glance?"

Here he paused briefly. He had enunciated a proposition appealing so directly to the human nature of his audience and so convincing to anyone having a touch of imagination that no one dreamed of challenging what he had said. Every face depicted the liveliest curiosity. Little Sibylle who sat crouched at the foot of the sofa where her mother reclined, drew closer to the latter with a convulsive shudder of apprehension, as if someone had slipped an asp between her flat child's bosom and her frock.

"Stop him, Mama," she cried, with the confidence of a spoiled child, brought up to be a little despot, "from telling us these horrid tales. They make me shiver."

"I will not say another word, if you prefer, Sibylle," replied the narrator, whom she had designated merely as *him*, with a childish, almost affectionate familiarity.

Living as he did in such close intimacy with the child, he knew her curiosities and her fears. She was one of those individuals who reacted to all things as one does when plunging into a cold bath, which catches one's breath as one's limbs sink deeper into the startling coolness of the water.

"Sibylle has no intention as far as I know of imposing silence on my friends," added the baroness, caressing her daughter's head, so precocious in its pensive gravity. "If she is afraid, she has the resource of the fearful — flight; she can run away."

But the capricious girl, who was perhaps just as curious as her mother to hear the story, did not run away but drew up her little body, trembling with fearful interest, fixing her dark, dreamy eyes on the narrator, as if she were looking into an abyss.

"Well, then, tell on!" ordered Mademoiselle Sophie de Revistal, turning on him her great brown eyes bathed in light and flashing devilishly,



yet suffused with limpid moisture. "Behold!" she added with an almost imperceptible gesture. "We are all listening."

Then he proceeded to tell the following tale. But can I reproduce a narrative that owed so much to nuance without spoiling the effect? How can I make the same vivid impression it produced on all the people gathered in the sympathetic atmosphere of this salon?

"I was brought up in the provinces," he began, enjoined to embark on his narrative, "in the home of my father's ancestors. My father lived in a village that flung its feet casually into a river, at the bottom of a hill. I will not tell you in what part of the country, but it was near a small provincial town you will recognize when I tell you it is, or rather was then, the most profoundly, ferociously aristocratic in all of France. I have never seen anything like it since. Neither our own Faubourg Saint-Germain, nor the Place Bellecour in Lyons, nor the three or four other big towns generally cited for their haughty and exclusive spirit of aristocracy, could give a notion of this little town of six thousand souls, which before 1789 had fifty emblazoned coaches rolling proudly over its cobblestones.

"It seemed the aristocracy, gradually withdrawing from other parts of the country, which every day was being overwhelmed by an insolent bourgeoisie, had concentrated here, as at the bottom of a crucible, giving out like a burning ruby the persistent brilliance that comes from the very substance of the stone and will only vanish with the stone itself.

"The nobility of this nest of nobles, who will die or perhaps have died still clinging to these prejudices, which for my own part I call sublime social truths, was as incapable of compromise as God. It did not experience what humiliates all nobilities, the degradation of misalliances.

"The girls, ruined as they were by the Revolution, would die stoically as old maids, pressed against their coat of arms that shielded them against everything. My puberty was fired by the ardent flame of these beautiful and charming young girls, who knew their beauty to be useless, and felt instinctively that the blood beating in their hearts and dyeing their serious cheeks scarlet coursed so hotly in vain.

"At thirteen I dreamed of romantic devotion to these poor girls, whose only fortune was the crowns on their escutcheons, girls imbued with a majestic melancholy all their lives, as befits those condemned by fate. This nobility, as pure as a mountain spring, saw no one outside the caste.

"'Would you wish us,' they would say, 'to know these bourgeois vulgarians, whose fathers handed plates to ours?'

"And they were right; it was impossible, for in a town of this size, it



was true. Emancipation is all very well — at a distance; but in an area as big as a handkerchief, breeds are inevitably divided off by the very fact of their proximity. So they visited each other, and no one else, except a few English people.

“For the English were drawn to the little place, which reminded them of some of their own counties. They liked it for its silence, its stiff propriety, the chill respectability of its ways of life, the close proximity of the sea that had brought them here, no less than for the possibility, due to the low price of things, of doubling their incomes, mediocre fortunes in their own country.

“Offspring of the same pirate breed as the Normans, they looked on this little Normandy town as a sort of continental England and used to take up residence there for long periods at a time.

“There the young English misses learned French as they pushed their hoops under the scraggy linden trees in the Place d’Armes; but always, as they approached eighteen, they would flee to England, for the ruined nobility could hardly afford the dangerous luxury of marrying English girls with small dowries. So they left, and another immigration would soon succeed to their abandoned homes, so that the quiet streets, where the grass grows as it does at Versailles, had always about the same number of promenaders in green veils, checked frocks, and Scotch plaids. Except for this temporary residence of English families, lasting on an average from seven to ten years, and their comings and goings at long intervals, nothing broke the monotonous existence of the little town. The monotony was dreadful.

“More than enough has been said about provincial life and the narrow circle within which it moves; but here, this life, which was so uneventful, was doubly so given that rivalry between classes and its attendant antagonisms and vanities were entirely absent. In most small places this is by no means so, and jealousy, hatred, and wounded self-love ferment silently and then occasionally erupt in some startling scandal, some evil deed, one of those little social villainies for which there are no courts.

“Here the gulf of demarcation was so deep, so wide and impassable, between what was noble and what was not that any struggle between patrician and plebeian was out of the question. To make a struggle possible, some common ground and mutual interests are indispensable, and these did not exist.

“However, ‘the devil had his due,’ as they say. At the bottom of their hearts, in their innermost thoughts, these bourgeois, whose fathers had handed plates, these sons of servants, now grown rich and independent,



were still cesspools of envy and hatred that would often spew their foulness and fury against their better-born neighbors — who for their part had simply erased them from their field of vision and paid them no more heed whatsoever, now that they had left their stables.

“Indeed they were oblivious of all these things, securely entrenched within the walls of their family mansions, whose doors remained closed against all but their equals; for their life ended where another caste began. What matter if their inferiors spoke ill of them? They would not hear it. The younger men, who might have bandied insults and picked a quarrel, never met in public places, arenas heated by the presence and eyes of women.

“There was no theater, actors never going there, for lack of a playhouse. The cafés, vile and provincial, seldom saw any other customers around their billiard tables but the most degraded section of the bourgeoisie, a few noisy, depraved sorts and retired officers, worn-out relics of the great wars of the empire. Yet, angered as they were by all these wounds to their sense of equality (a feeling capable by itself of fully accounting for the horrors of the Revolution), these citizens had retained, in spite of themselves, a certain superstitious reverence for rank and birth they had long ago formally repudiated.

“The reverence of the populace is something like the sacred Ampulla of Rheims, on which so much good wit has been wasted. When it is all gone, there is still some left. The knickknack maker’s son declaims against the inequalities of rank; but he would never dream of walking alone across the public square of his native town, where everybody knows everybody else and has lived since childhood, to insult lightly the son, say, of a Clamorgan-Taillefer passing by with his sister on his arm. The whole town would be up in arms against him. Like everything else that provokes malice and envy, birth exercises over the very people who most bitterly reject it a physical ascendancy, which is perhaps the best proof of its rights. In times of revolution this ascendancy is reacted against, which is still to submit to it; in times of peace, one submits to it all along.

“Well, 182— was one of these periods of tranquility. Liberalism, which was growing steadily under the shadow of the Constitutional Charter, as were its champions and watchdogs in their borrowed kennel, had not yet smothered the royalism that the return of the princes from exile had stirred in every heart to the point of exhilaration. Say what you will, it was a proud moment for France, convalescent and once more monarchical; the knife of successive revolutions had cut her bosom, but full of hope, she thought she could go on living this way, not yet feeling in



her veins the mysterious germs of the cancer that had already begun to tear her apart and would one day kill her.

"For the little town I am describing it was a time of profound and utter calm. A religious mission, which had just closed, had dulled, so far as aristocratic society was concerned, the last vestiges of liveliness, excitement, and youthful pleasures. No one danced. Balls were proscribed as a vice. Young girls wore mission crosses on their bosoms and formed pious organizations under the direction of a president. Everything tended toward a certain gravity that would have been laughable had anyone dared to laugh. When the four whist tables were laid ready for the dowagers and old gentlemen, and the two *écarté* tables for the younger folk, these girls used to take up their station, as if in church, in a sanctuary apart, where they were separated from the men, and form a silent group in one corner of the room — silent — that is, for their sex (for everything is relative). They never spoke louder than a whisper but yawned furtively until their eyes were red, their rigid postures contrasting with the suppleness of their waists, the pink and lilac of their frocks, and the playfulness of their golden capes and ribbons."

## II

"The one thing," continued the narrator of this story, in which everything is as true and real as the little town itself where it all happened and which he had described so perfectly that a less discreet member of the company had just uttered its name, "the one thing that resembled I will not say a passion, but an activity, a desire, a strong sensation, of any sort, in this strangely constituted society where the young girls had eighty years of world-weariness weighing on their calm and innocent hearts, was card playing, that last resource of exhausted spirits.

"Cards were the one great business of these old aristocrats, modeled as they were on the pattern of the great lords of a former day and as idle as a lot of old blind women. They played like Normans, the ancestors of the English, the most heavily gambling nation on earth. Their kinship with this people, their residence in England during the emigration, the solemnity of the game, secret and silent as state diplomacy, all had combined to make them adopt whist. It was whist that filled the bottomless abyss of their empty days. They used to play the game every evening after dinner until midnight or one o'clock in the morning — which is wild dissipation in the country. To take a hand at the Marquis de Saint-Albans's table was the event of the day. The marquis was in a way the feudal lord of all these nobles, and they surrounded



him in an aura of respectful consideration, an achievement in itself, when those who show it merit it themselves.

"The marquis was very good at whist. He was now seventy-nine and had met most of the great men and great players of an earlier generation. He had played with Maurepas, with the Comte d'Artois himself, who was as great at whist as he was at tennis, with the Prince de Polignac, with Bishop Louis de Rohan, with Cagliostro, with the Prince de la Lippe, with Fox, Dundas, and Sheridan, with the Prince of Wales, with Talleyrand — with the devil himself, they said, when he was going recklessly to the devil in the blackest days of the emigration. He required opponents therefore worthy of him. Generally speaking, the English who were received by the nobility supplied their contingent of efficients to the marquis's table, which was recognized as an established institution and always spoken of as Monsieur de Saint-Albans's game, just as they said the king's game at court.

"One evening, at Madame de Beaumont's, the green tables stood ready as usual; they were only waiting for Monsieur Hartford, an Englishman, to complete the great marquis's game. He was a businessman who ran a large cotton mill at Pont-aux-Arches — parenthetically, one of the first of its kind established in Normandy, a country so slow to adopt improvements, not from ignorance or dullness of comprehension, but by virtue of that cautiousness that is the distinctive characteristic of the Normans. Allow me this parenthesis as well: The Normans always remind me of Montaigne's fox, so adept at syllogism. Wherever they step, they have a strong foothold.

"However, to return to our Englishman, Monsieur Hartford — whom the young men simply referred to as 'Hartford,' though fifty had long since struck on the silver bell of his head (I can still see it now with its cropped hair, shiny as a white silk skullcap). He was one of the marquis's favorites. What is surprising about this? He was a player of the first order, a man whose life (a veritable phantasmagoria, by the way) had meaning or reality only when he was seated at the whist table, a man who constantly repeated that 'the greatest happiness was to win at cards, and the second greatest was to lose' — a sublime axiom he had borrowed from Sheridan, but which he applied in a way that absolved him from having taken it. For the rest, aside from this one vice (in consideration of which the Marquis de Saint-Albans would have forgiven him the most eminent virtues), Monsieur Hartford seemed to possess all those Pharisaic and Protestant qualities English people sum up with the smug word 'respectability.' He was thought to be a perfect gentleman. The marquis used to invite him to spend weeks at a time at his château



de la Vanillière, and in town he spent every evening in his company.

"So all were surprised that evening, the marquis included, when the usually so scrupulous and punctual Englishman was late. It was August. The windows were thrown open onto one of those lovely gardens you see only in the country, and young girls gathered in the window seats talking together and leaning their heads against the draperies. The marquis, seated at the whist table, furrowed his long, white brows. His elbows were on the table, and his delicate old hands were clasped under his chin, while the dignified features expressed his displeasure at being kept waiting; he looked for all the world like Louis XIV, whose majesty he possessed. At last a servant announced Monsieur Hartford, who appeared, as always, dressed impeccably, his linen dazzling in its whiteness, rings on all his fingers, as we have since seen Mr. Bulwer wear them, an Indian handkerchief in his hand, and between his lips (for he had just dined) the scented pastille that veiled anchovies, Harvey sauce, and port wine.

"But he was not alone. He came forward and greeted the marquis, introducing to him, as a shield against all reproof, one of his friends, a Scotchman, Monsieur Marmor de Karkoel, who had burst in on him like a bombshell in the middle of his dinner and who was the best whist player in the Three Kingdoms.

"This circumstance brought a charming smile to the marquis's pale lips. The game was instantly arranged. In his haste to start playing, Monsieur de Karkoel did not remove his gloves, the perfection of which recalled those of Beau Brummell, the famous gloves cut by three craftsmen, two for the hand and one for the thumb. He was Monsieur de Saint-Albans's partner, the dowager de Hautcardon relinquishing her place to him.

"As to his personal appearance, ladies, Marmor de Karkoel was a man of about twenty-eight; but a burning sun and the fatigues, or perhaps the passions, of an unknown past had engraved on his features all the marks of thirty-five. His was not a handsome face, but it was expressive. His hair was black, coarse, straight, and rather short, and he constantly pushed a hand through it, brushing it from his temples. This gesture was full of a genuine but sinister eloquence. It seemed to be an effort to be rid of some remorse. This was what was first striking and, like all profound impressions, always remained so.

"I knew Karkoel for several years, and I can assure you this somber gesture, repeated as it was ten times an hour, never failed to be impressive and invariably brought the same thought to the minds of a hundred different observers. His forehead, low but even, bespoke a boldness.



His clean-shaven upper lip (mustaches were not then commonly worn, as they are now) had an immobility that would drive Lavater to despair and anyone else who believed that the secret of a man's nature is more clearly written in the mobile lines of the mouth than in the expression of the eyes. When he smiled, his eyes did not, but he showed a row of teeth as white and even as pearls, such as the English, sons of the sea, sometimes have — only to lose them or blacken them, like the Chinese, in the floods of their horrid tea. His face was long and hollow cheeked, his complexion a natural olive hue, but heavily tanned in some climate where the sun beats down with greater power than in dull, foggy England, or they could never have scorched him so fiercely. He had a long, straight nose, though it jutted beyond the curve of the forehead and divided the two eyes. These were not so much black as dark, with a somber depth that recalled Macbeth's fatal look; they were set close together, which they say is the mark of an extravagant character or some mental obliquity. His attire had a studied elegance. Seated, as he now was, nonchalantly at the whist table, he seemed taller than he actually was, owing to a slight disproportion of the torso, for he was really short. Except for this defect, he was well built, his figure suggesting the same latent strength and agility as the tiger hides beneath his velvety coat.

"Did he speak French well? Was his voice, that golden chisel with which we carve our thoughts and engrave our seduction in the soul of our auditors, in harmony with the gesture I have described, and which I cannot even now recall without dreaming of it? This much at any rate is certain: that evening it made no one tremble. He pronounced, and in the most ordinary tones, only the sacramental words of *tricks* and *honors*, the only expressions at whist which interrupt at measured intervals the solemn silence that enwraps the players.

"In the large room, full of people for whom the arrival of an Englishman was more or less a circumstance of great indifference, no one except those at the marquis's table paid any heed to the unknown whist player, towed in by Hartford. The group of girls did not so much as turn their heads to look at him over their shoulders. They were busy discussing (discussion was then first coming into vogue) the composition of the committee of their association and the resignation of one of the vice presidents, who was not present that evening at Madame de Beaumont's. This was surely a more important matter than watching any Englishman or Scotchman. Indeed, they were a trifle bored by these everlasting importations from Great Britain. This man would be like the rest of them; the only members of the sex he would waste a thought



on would be the queen of diamonds and the queen of clubs! And a Protestant! A heretic! If it had been a Catholic nobleman from Ireland, that would have been a very different thing! As for the older guests, who were already engaged in play at the different tables when Monsieur Hartford was announced, they cast a perfunctory glance at the stranger who followed him in, and, this done, plunged themselves once more in their cards, as swans plunge their long neck deep in the water.

"Monsieur de Karkoel having been chosen as the Marquis de Saint-Albans's partner, the player facing Monsieur Hartford was the Comtesse du Tremblay de Stasseville, whose daughter Herminie, the sweetest of all the girls adorning the recessed windows of the drawing room, was at the moment in conversation with Mademoiselle Ernestine de Beaumont. By chance her eyes fell in the direction of the table where her mother was playing.

"Look, Ernestine,' she exclaimed in a low voice, look at the way the Scotchman deals!'

"Monsieur de Karkoel had taken off his well-fitting gloves of scented kid, showing a pair of white, beautifully shaped hands, which a fashionable beauty would have cherished had she possessed them, and was now dealing out the cards, one by one as is done at whist, but with a circular sweep of such prodigious rapidity, it was as amazing as Liszt's fingering. A man who could handle cards like that must be their master. Ten years of a gambler's life stood confessed in the sleight of hand of this stunning way of dealing.

"A hardly won triumph,' said the haughty Ernestine with a disdainful curl of the lip, 'of bad form!' A harsh thing for so young a girl to say; but then in that pretty head *good form* counted for more than all the wit and wisdom of Voltaire. She had missed her vocation, this Mademoiselle Ernestine; she must have died of sorrow not to have been *camerera major* to a Spanish queen.

"Marmor de Karkoel's style of play matched his extraordinary style of dealing. He showed a superiority that intoxicated the old marquis, for he actually improved the game of this old partner of Fox's and raised it to his own level. Superiority of every kind is an irresistible seduction that carries you away with it in its course. But this is not all; it enriches you at the same time. Look at great talkers; repartee inspires repartee, and one witty word provokes another. As soon as they cease speaking, fools, robbed of the golden ray of inspiration that brightened their wits, gasp dull and helpless on the surface of the conversation, like dead fish floating belly up, their scales invisible. But Monsieur de Karkoel did more than merely give a new sensation to a man who had



exhausted most; he increased the marquis's estimate of his own powers and crowned with yet another stone the stately obelisk that had long stood at the same height, which this king of whist had raised to his own glory in the quiet solitudes of his pride.

"Despite the excitement that made him feel young again, the marquis observed the stranger during the game from the covert of the network of crow's feet (as we call Time's signature on our faces, in payment for the insolence of writing it there) that lined his keen eyes. The Scotchman could only be relished, appreciated, and savored by a player possessed of rare powers himself. He wore a look of deep and serious concentration, ready with a new combination to meet each turn of the game, yet veiling it all under a superb air of impassivity. Beside him, the Egyptian Sphinx, crouching on her basalt foundation, would have looked like the figure of trust and expansiveness. He played as if his adversaries were simply three pairs of hands holding the cards, and he disdained to inquire whose hands they were. The dying breezes of that August night broke softly in waves of fragrance over the bareheaded young girls' tresses and came laden with fresh perfumes of maidenhood to break against the stranger's broad, low, sunburnt brow; but it remained as hard and as unruffled as a rock of marble. He did not so much as notice it. His nerves were steel. At this moment he was, indeed, worthy of the name of Marmor. Needless to say, he won.

"The marquis withdrew, as was his invariable custom, toward midnight. He was conducted to his carriage by the obsequious Hartford, who lent him the support of his arm.

"*'This Karkoel is the very god of tricks!'* the marquis said to him, surprised and delighted. *'Pray! see that he does not leave us too soon.'*

"Hartford promised, and the old marquis, in spite of his age and sex, prepared to play the part of a siren of hospitality.

"I have described at some length this first evening of a stay that lasted several years. I was not present myself on the occasion, but I have heard it all from one of my older relatives who, like all the young men in this dull little town where the game was the only resource available in the dearth of any passion, was an ardent whist player, and readily fell under the ascendancy of the *'god of tricks.'* Looking back now, from the magical vantage point of retrospect, the evening, so commonplace a bit of prose in itself — a game of whist and a winning hand — took on an importance some might deem exaggerated.

"The fourth player, the Comtesse de Stasseville, my informant would continue, lost her money with the same aristocratic indifference that she displayed under all circumstances. Yet it was perhaps at this very



game that her fate was decided, wherever destinies are decided; for indeed, which of us can understand one word of the mysteries of life? No one at the time had any particular interest in watching the countess. The room was in a ferment with the sound of cards and counters. Nothing about this woman, then judged by one and all to be a cold and sharp icicle, suggested what subsequently came to be believed and repeated from mouth to mouth in awestruck whispers, a shift in perception that truly dated from this moment.

"The Comtesse du Tremblay de Stasseville was a woman of forty; her health was poor, and she was pale and thin, but pale and thin in a way peculiar to herself. Her Bourbon nose, with its thin nostrils, her auburn hair and exquisitely delicate lips proclaimed her a lady of birth, but one in whom pride might easily degenerate into cruelty. Her complexion, tinged with sulfur, had a sickly look.

"If her name had been Constance,' quipped Mademoiselle Ernestine de Beaumont, who ransacked even Gibbon for an epigram, 'she might have been called Constantius Chlorus.'

"Anyone who understood the character of Mademoiselle de Beaumont's wit was free to read a sinister meaning into the phrase. Yet in spite of her pallor, in spite of the faded color of the Comtesse de Stasseville's lips, there was for an educated observer in those same lips, thin, tense, and vibrant as a stretched bow string, an almost terrifying look of repressed ardor and will. That provincial society did not notice it. She herself saw nothing in the rigidity of that narrow, murderous lip but the steel wire on which the barbed arrow of an epigram forever danced. Eyes of bluish-green (for the countess's eyes, like her coat of arms, were a sparkling green) blazed like two fixed stars in a face they adorned but left cold. These twin emeralds, with yellow glints, set under the pale, arched brows, were as cold as if they had been the very jewels recovered from the belly of Polycrates' fish.

"Only her brilliant wit, sharp and shining as a Damascus sword blade, lighted up now and again her glassy gaze with flashes of the 'flaming sword that turned every way,' spoken of in the Bible. Women hated the Comtesse du Tremblay for her wit as though it were beauty; and indeed it *was* her beauty. Like Mademoiselle de Retz, of whom the cardinal has left so unflattering a portrait, she had a figure that might have been called deformed. Her fortune was considerable. Her husband at his death had left her with the slight responsibility of two children: a little boy, ravishingly stupid, entrusted to the paternal, but most ineffectual, care of an old priest who taught him nothing; and a daughter, Herminie, whose beauty would have excited admiration in the most critical artis-



tic circles of Paris. She had brought her up irreproachably, from the conventional point of view; but then with Madame de Stasseville the irreproachable always implied a certain insolence. Even her virtue was made a ground for the same feeling, and it may be this was her sole motive for preserving it so scrupulously. Virtuous at any rate she was; her good name defied scandal. No serpent's tooth had ever been sharpened on that stone. So her critics, bitterly resenting the impossibility of finding a flaw in her honor, made up for it by accusing her of coldness. This was due no doubt, they said (so learned and scientific were they), to her anemia. A little judicious pressure, and the best of her friends would have discovered in her the same *hereditary* obstacle that was invented against a celebrated and charming woman of the last century to account for the fact of her having had all the fashionable gentlemen of Europe at her feet for ten long years without suffering one of them to advance a single inch higher."

The last words were a trifle risky, but the light tone in which they were spoken saved the situation, though they *did* occasion a slight ruffle of offended modesty. I say modesty, not prudery, for with well-bred and high-born women, who are absolutely devoid of affectation, modesty is genuine and gracious. The daylight was now so dim that the movement was felt more than seen.

"Upon my word, she was just as you describe her, the Comtesse de Stasseville," observed the old Vicomte de Rassy, with his customary stammer. He had a humpback as well as a stammer, and wit enough to have been a cripple into the bargain. What Parisian does not know the viscount, that living *memorandum* of the little weaknesses of the eighteenth century? With a face as handsome in his young days as that of the Maréchal de Luxembourg himself, there was in his case, too, a reverse side of the medal — and the reverse was all that was left him now. As for the better side, it was defaced long ago. When young men found him out in some little anachronism of behavior, he would observe that at any rate he was not soiling his white hair, for he always wore a chestnut wig, with a false part down the middle and the most preposterous and indescribable corkscrew curls.

"Ah! You knew her, then?" the speaker said, interrupting his narrative. "Well, you can tell us, Vicomte, if I exaggerate in the least."

"Your p — p — portrait is as faithful as a tracing," returned the viscount, giving himself a little slap on the cheek in impatience at his stammering — and at the risk of knocking off some of the rouge they say he wears, as he does everything, with an entire absence of shame. "I knew her a — a — round the time of your story. She was in the habit of visiting



Paris every winter for a few days. I used to meet her at the Princess de C — C — Courtenay's, to whom she was related in some way. Her wit was served up on ice; a woman cold enough to set you coughing!"

"Except for those days spent every winter in Paris," resumed the daring storyteller, who did not give his characters even the half-mask of Harlequin, "the Comtesse du Tremblay de Stasseville's life was ruled like that tiresome sheet music called a respectable woman's life in the provinces. She was buried for six months of the year in her mansion in the little town I have described so particularly, exchanging it during the other six for her château on a fine estate she had a dozen miles away. Every two years she used to take her daughter to Paris — leaving her, when she visited the capital alone, under the charge of an old aunt, Mademoiselle de Triflebas — early in the winter; but never a thought of Spa, or Plombières, or the Pyrenees! She was never seen at the thermal springs. Was this due to the fear of what spiteful tongues might say? In the provinces, when a woman in Madame de Stasseville's circumstances goes alone to take the waters so far away, what won't people imagine, what unworthy motives will they not suspect? This is the way the envy of those left behind avenges the pleasure of those who go traveling. Strange winds of gossip ripple the placidity of these waters. Is it on the Yellow River or the Blue that they expose the infants in China? Our French spas have some resemblance to this river, whatever its name. If not a child, there is always something being exposed there, in the opinion of those who stay at home.

"The sarcastic Comtesse du Tremblay was too proud to sacrifice any of her caprices in deference to public opinion, but spas were not one of them. Her doctor much preferred to have her near him rather than four or five hundred miles away, for at that distance coddling visits, at ten francs each, cannot well be numerous. Moreover, it was a question whether the countess had any caprices at all. Wit is not imagination; her wit was so clear-cut, incisive, and positive, even in her least serious moods, that its nature seemed incompatible with the very idea of caprice. In moments of gaiety (but these were rare), it gave out so hard a ring, like ebony castanets or the Basque drum, all tight-stretched parchment and little metallic bells, that you could never picture that hard, trenchant spirit as harboring any element of imagination, any of those wistful reveries that rouse a longing to leave one's own place for new surroundings. Any time during the ten years she had been a rich widow, and therefore mistress of herself and much else, she could easily enough have transferred her stagnant existence elsewhere, far from this poor little nest of nobles, where her evenings were wasted at whist or



Boston, in the company of a lot of old maids who had seen the Chouan insurrection, and aged warriors, obscure heroes who had helped to deliver Destouches.

"Like Lord Byron, she might have roamed the world with a library, a portable kitchen, and an aviary in her coach; but she had never had the least desire to do so. She was better than indolent, she was indifferent — as finely indifferent as Marmor de Karkoel at the whist table. Only Marmor was not really indifferent to whist, and in *her* life there was no whist — every day was the same! Her nature was of the stagnant sort; a woman dandy, the English would have called her. Except for her epigrams, she existed merely as a fashionable larva. 'She belongs to the class of white-blooded animals,' her doctor used to whisper confidentially to his intimates, thinking to explain her by an image, as a disease might be explained by a symptom.

"Though she always looked ill, the baffled doctor declared that there was nothing the matter with her. Was this discretion? Or was he really blind? At any rate she never complained of discomfort, whether physical or emotional. She had not even that shade of melancholy, as much physical as anything else, that usually broods over the mortified features of women of forty. She knew the secret of growing old gracefully, without unseemly struggle and reluctance, watching the years go by with the same mocking glance (such as Undine might have cast from her sea-green eyes) as she had for all the circumstances of life.

"She seemed to belie her reputation as a woman of wit by refusing altogether to accentuate her behavior with any of those forms of personality that we call eccentricities. She did quite simply and naturally whatever other women in her own circle did, neither more nor less. She wanted to prove that equality, that pipe dream of peasants, only truly exists amongst noblemen. There and there alone, all are peers, for the distinction of birth and the four generations of nobility required to make a gentleman level all distinctions. 'I am only the first gentleman of France,' Henri IV used to say, by these words subordinating the pretensions of each individual to the high status of all. Like the other ladies of her rank, whom she was too proud even to wish to excel, the countess fulfilled all the external duties of religion and society with a quiet, sober exactitude that is the acme of good breeding in circles where enthusiasms of any kind are strictly forbidden. She neither lagged behind nor outdid her contemporaries. Had she so far subdued her spirit as to have finally accepted the monotonous existence of this dull little provincial town, where the remaining vestiges of her youth had dried up, like a stagnant pool beneath water lilies? The common motives for



action — motives of reason, conscience, instinct, reflection, temperament, predilection — all these interior flames that throw light on our actions threw no light on hers. No glimmer from within ever revealed the woman's outward being; no outward condition ever affected her inward nature! Tired of waiting so long and never discovering anything about Mme de Stasseville, her country neighbors, who ordinarily were as patient as a prisoner or a fisherman waiting for a bite when they wanted to find something out, had finally given up the enigma, as a man pitches a manuscript behind a box, when he finds it impossible to decipher.

"‘I think we are very stupid,’ the Comtesse de Hautcardon had declared dogmatically one evening — and this was now several years ago — ‘to make such a rumpus about discovering what’s at the bottom of the woman’s soul. Most likely there’s nothing there at all.’"

### III

"And this opinion of the dowager de Hautcardon's had been accepted as final. It had the force of law on these good people, annoyed and disappointed as they were at the futility of their observations, and who only sought a reason to put their minds to rest on the matter. This opinion reigned, the way lazy kings do, when Marmor de Karkoel, perhaps the man least likely to come into the Comtesse du Tremblay de Stasseville's life, arrived from the other side of the world to take his seat at the green table where a partner was needed to make up the game. He was a native, so said his guide, Hartford, of the mist-wrapped Shetland Isles, the scene of Sir Walter Scott's sublime tale *The Pirate* — a character Marmor was now to reproduce as understudy, with modifications, in an obscure little town on the English Channel. He had been reared by the shores of the sea furrowed by Cleveland's vessel; as a youth he had danced the same dances young Mordaunt did in the story with old Irvil's daughter. These he had never forgotten, and more than once I have seen him dance them on the polished oak floors of our little town, so incongruous in its prosaic respectability with the wild, barbaric poetry of these northern dances. At fifteen he had been bought a lieutenancy in an English regiment under orders for India, and for twelve years had fought in the Mahratta wars. This much was soon found out from himself and his friend Hartford, as well as the fact that he was a gentleman of birth, related to the famous Scotch family of the Douglasses, of the Bleeding Heart.

"But this was all. The rest lay under a veil of mystery that was never to be lifted. His adventures in India, that great and terrible land where



distended men learn ways of breathing for which Western air will not suffice, these he never told. They were traced in mysterious lettering on his dusky brow, a lid that was never lifted, like those Asiatic poison boxes that are kept in case of disaster and defeat in the jewel chests of Indian rajahs. They stood half revealed in the keen flash of his dark eyes, a flash he could instantly extinguish under scrutiny, as you blow out a candle to escape being seen, no less than in the quick gesture, already described, with which he would dash back his hair from his temples a dozen times in succession during a rubber of whist or a game of *écarté*. But apart from these hieroglyphics of gesture and physiognomy, legible enough to competent observers, and like the language of the Egyptian hieroglyphics restricted to a very small number of words, Marmor de Karkoel was as undecipherable in his way as the Comtesse du Tremblay was in hers. He was a Cleveland, who kept silent.

"All the young noblemen in town, and there were several with plenty of wit, inquisitive as women and wily as serpents, were devoured with desire to get him to reveal the unpublished memoirs of his youth over a cigarette. But they had invariably failed to do so. This sea lion of the Hebrides, browned by the sun of Lahore, declined to be caught in these petty snares baited to entice his vanity, the sort of peacock trap in which French conceit leaves all its feathers behind, for the mere pleasure of having displayed them. The difficulty was insurmountable. He was as sober as a Turk who obeys the Koran implicitly, a veritable mute, guarding the seraglio of his thoughts. I never saw him drink anything stronger than water or coffee. Card playing certainly seemed a passion with him; but it is open to question whether this was genuine or only assumed, for a passion, like a disease, may be brought on artificially. Was it only a kind of screen that he set up to hide his soul? I could never help thinking this was so, when I saw the way he played. He developed, cultivated, magnified the passion for the game in the heart of the little town, to such a degree that, after he was gone, an atrocious spleen, the cruel spleen of balked infatuations, fell on it like a sirocco, making the resemblance more striking than ever to an English city. At his rooms the whist table stood ready from an early hour in the morning. His day, when not spent at La Vanillière or some other château nearby, was as simply ordered as that of men consumed by an *idée fixe*. He rose at nine, took his cup of tea with some friend who had come to play whist, then played until five o'clock in the afternoon. As his little parties were always crowded, players were changed after each rubber, and those who were not playing bet on those who were. It was by no means only young men who frequented these entertainments, but the most serious men



of the town. *Fathers of families*, as ladies of a certain age observed, dared to spend their days in this gambling hell; and they took every opportunity to attribute evil motives to the Scotchman, and to smear his name with tarts of bile, as if he had inoculated the whole countryside with a pestilence in the persons of their husbands. They were quite accustomed to seeing them play, but never before with this degree of persistent infatuation.

"Toward five o'clock the party would break up, only to reassemble later in the evening at some social gathering. There they would to all appearances conform to the ordinary style of play, such as was approved by the hostesses of the houses they frequented, but in reality only to play out surreptitiously the morning's match at what they called 'Karkoel's game.' I leave you to imagine to what a high level of play these enthusiasts attained, seeing this had now become the one and only thing they set their minds to. They brought their whist to the height of the most difficult and magnificent fencing. No doubt considerable losses occurred sometimes; but what prevented anything in the way of catastrophe and ruin, such as gambling invariably brings in its trail, was just this—the persistent eagerness and superior skill the players brought to bear. All the different factors ended by canceling each other out; besides, in so narrow a field, partners were necessarily so often interchanged that after a certain time every player was bound, in the argot of whist, 'to have his revenge.'

"The influence Marmor de Karkoel exercised, an influence reasonable women abhorred and secretly maneuvered against, did not diminish but, on the contrary, increased. Nor was this to be wondered at. It owed its origin not so much to Marmor's own strong personality as to the existence of a passion already flourishing in the soil on his arrival, but which his presence, sharing it and sympathizing with it as he did, had exalted. The best, perhaps the only means of governing men is to rule them through their passions. How then could Karkoel not have been powerful? He possessed the main element of the power of governments, and yet he had no ambition to govern. All this enabled him positively to bewitch his willing subjects, and they almost fought for his society. The whole time he remained in the place, he invariably received the same welcome and the most pressing, even feverish invitations. The very women who feared him would rather see him at their houses than know their sons or their husbands to be at his, and were always ready to receive him, as women will receive, even against their own inclination, a man who is the center of attention, interest, and action, of whatever sort.



"In summer he would go for a fortnight or a month to the country. The Marquis de Saint-Albans had made him the object of his special admiration — *protection*, I was going to say, but that is not a strong enough word. There, as in town, the whist playing never ceased. I remember being present (I was a schoolboy home for the holidays at the time) at a wonderful salmon-fishing party, in the crystal waters of the Douve, and from beginning to end Marmor de Karkoel sat in a boat playing 'double dummy' whist with a gentleman of the neighborhood. He would have gone on playing if the boat had upset and he had tumbled into the river!

"Only one member of this society, and that one a woman, never invited the Scotchman to her house in the country, and very seldom to her entertainments in town. This was the Comtesse du Tremblay. And who could wonder at it? She was a widow with a young and charming daughter. In the petty society of a country town, so full of envy and narrow-mindedness, and where it is everyone's business to poke into other people's affairs, too many precautions cannot be taken to guard against those ill-natured inferences from the known to the unknown which are so easy to draw. The Comtesse du Tremblay was duly cautious, never once asking Marmor to the château de Stasseville, and in town only receiving him on the most public occasions, when she gathered all her acquaintances around her. Her manner toward him was cold, polite, and formal, expressing merely the consideration a well-bred person owes to everyone, not so much for their sake as for one's own. He responded with the same kind of impersonal politeness; and so natural was this to both, so little a matter of affectation, that it aroused no suspicion for four years.

"Away from the card table, as I have already mentioned, Karkoel seemed not to exist and rarely spoke. If he had anything to conceal, this habitual silence formed an excellent screen for the purpose. On the other hand, the countess, you may remember, was only too ready to express her sentiments in some biting phrase. For natures of this kind — expansive, brilliant, aggressive as they are — self-restraint, self-effacement is always difficult. Is not self-effacement a sort of self-betrayal? But then, if she had the fascinating, iridescent scales and triple tongue of the serpent, she had the cunning too. There was nothing therefore to modify the usual savage impetuosity of her witty onslaughts. Often, when Karkoel was mentioned in her presence, she would fire off one of those phrases that sting and wound, and which turned Mademoiselle de Beaumont, her rival in the art of epigram, green with envy. If this was but another deception, never was deception better and bolder! Was this



terrible power of dissimulation an integral part of her dry, warped character? But then, why practice it at all? For was she not the very personification of independence by virtue of her position and proud, sarcastic nature? If she loved Karkoel and her love was returned, why hide it beneath the cruel gibes she cast at him from time to time, beneath the traitorous, renegade, impious witticisms that degrade the adored image, the greatest sacrilege in love?

"My God! Who can tell? It may be she found some source of happiness in it all. Now, looking at her" — the narrator turned to Doctor Beylasset, who was leaning his elbows on a Boulle cabinet, and whose fine bald head reflected back the light of a candelabra the servants had lighted a moment before above him — "looking at the Comtesse de Stasseville from a *physiological* point of view — as you doctors do, an example our moralists might follow with advantage — you could not help seeing quite plainly that, in this impressionable nature, everything was bound to turn within, to penetrate inward, like the line of faded rose that formed her retracted lips, like the stiff, unquivering nostrils, that narrowed instead of blossoming out, like the eyes, so deeply sunk beneath the arch of her eyebrows that they seemed sometimes to be retreating backward into the brain altogether. In spite of her apparent delicacy of constitution and physical weakness, whose effects could be seen in her whole being, like the gradual spreading of a crack in a desiccated substance, she bore the most unmistakable signs of a strong will, the Volta battery within us which is the center of our nerves. Everything about her testified to this more strikingly than in any other living being I have ever seen. This flux and reflux of slumbering willpower circulated *potentially* (forgive the pedantry of the expression), even in her hands, aristocratic and princely in their whiteness, in the opalescent smoothness of the nails, and in their elegance, but which, in their extreme leanness, the complication of swollen veins that marked them with a thousand corded blue lines, and above all the nervous, furtive way they had of grasping things, resembled those fabulous claws that classical poetry attributes to certain monsters with women's faces and bosoms. When, after darting out one of her sayings, one of her shafts of sarcasm, as keen and glittering as the poisoned arrows of savages, she passed her viperish tongue over her sibilant lips, you felt instinctively that in some fatal moment of destiny, the woman, at once so frail and so strong, would be quite capable of adopting the Negro's resource of resolutely swallowing that supple tongue in order to die. To look at her was to be convinced she was, among womankind, an example of those organisms to be found in every domain of nature which, by predilection or instinct,



seek out the depths rather than the surfaces of things; one of those beings predestined for occult associations, plunging into life as bold swimmers plunge under water or as miners breathe the air of subterranean vaults. Such creatures love mystery for its own sake, and out of the very recesses of their nature, create it around them, loving and pursuing it even to the extent of deception — for, after all, what is deception but a doubling of mystery, curtains of secrecy, willful obscurity? It may well be such natures love deception for deception's sake, as others love art for art's sake, or as the Poles love battle." Here the doctor gravely nodded his head in agreement. "You think so! Well, so do I! I am convinced that for some souls, happiness consists in imposture. These find an appalling but intoxicating bliss in the very notion of falsehood and deceit, in the thought that 'they alone know their true selves' and that they are duping society with a comedy of errors and reimbursing themselves for the cost of staging it with all the voluptuous pleasure of contempt."

"But what you're saying now is simply atrocious!" the Baronne de Mascranny suddenly interrupted, with a cry of outraged loyalty.

Every woman listening (and perhaps there were some connoisseurs of secret pleasures among them) had experienced a certain thrill at the speaker's last words. I knew it by the Comtesse de Damnaglio's naked back, which was then in such proximity. Everyone has felt this sort of nervous thrill. It is sometimes poetically called "Death going by." Was it this time perhaps Truth going by?

"Why, yes!" returned the narrator, "Atrocious enough, no doubt! Only, is it true? People who wear their hearts on their sleeve, as people say, can form no notion of the furtive joys of hypocrisy, the solitary gratifications of those who live and breathe without difficulty under a mask. But, if you come to think of it, it is easy to understand how the satisfactions they enjoy have actually all the deep intensity of hell's fiery delights. For what is hell but a heaven reversed? The two words *diabolical* and *divine*, when applied to extremes of enjoyment, express the same thing, that is, sensations that reach the supernatural. Was Madame de Stasseville one of these strange souls? I am neither accusing nor acquitting her. All I propose to do is to tell her story, which no one really knows, and to shed some light on it through a study in the style of Cuvier. This and nothing more.

"I can picture the Comtesse du Tremblay now from memory, in which her image stands out as clearly and distinctly as the deeply chiseled lines of an onyx seal impressed on wax; but such analysis was far beyond me at the time. If I have understood this woman, it was only much later. The all-powerful will I recognized in her on reflection,



when experience had taught me how truly the body is the mold of the soul, had as yet no more stirred and braced her existence, hemmed in between her placid habits, than the ocean wave disturbs a lake, hemmed in by its banks. But for the arrival of Karkoel, this officer in the English infantry whom his countrymen had sent to eat up his half-pay in this petty Norman town, the dull respectability of which made it seem almost English, this pale and ailing woman with the mocking tongue, whom some called the Lady of the Frost, in playful derision at her coldness, would never even herself have come to know the imperious will that lay within her bosom of melted snow, as Mademoiselle Ernestine de Beaumont called it, its glassy surface, hard as polar ice, untouched by moral scruple.

"When he came, what did she experience? Did she instantly learn the secret that, for a nature such as hers, to feel strongly is to will inexorably? Did she, by sheer exercise of will, draw to her side a man who seemed to have no passion left for anything but cards? How did she contrive an intimacy, in this country town where the risks of discovery were so many? Mysteries all — and mysteries still. At the end of 182—, no one had yet suspected a thing. Yet at that very moment, in one of the most peaceful-looking mansions in the whole town, where whist was the great event of every day, and almost every night, behind the silent shutters and embroidered muslin curtains, the chaste, elegant, half-dropped veils of a quiet life, there must have been developing a romance the world would have sworn to be utterly impossible. Yes, romance was there, in that correct, irreproachable, well-regulated life, a life cold and cynical to a fault, where intellect seemed to count for everything and soul for nothing. It was there, gnawing at this life beneath appearance and reputation, like worms that have begun to devour a man's body before it has expired."

"What a horrible simile!" again interrupted the Baronne de Mascranny. "My poor Sibylle was partly right in not wishing to hear your story. Your imagination has surely run away with you tonight."

"Shall I stop?" responded the other politely, but with the slyness and cunning of a man who is sure of the interest he has aroused.

"The ideal!" cried the baroness to this proposal. "How could you leave off now in the middle of a half-told tale, with us all on the tiptoe of expectation?"

"That would be too great a strain!" said Mademoiselle Laure d'Alzanne languidly as she unwound one of her fine blue-black ringlets, the very image of happy idleness, in graceful protest of this threatened interruption.



"And most disappointing!" added the doctor with a laugh. "Just as if a barber, after shaving one side of your face, were quietly to shut his razor and tell you he could not possibly do anything more."

"Well, then! I will proceed," resumed the narrator, with the simplicity of the art that conceals art; "In 182— I was in the drawing room of one of my uncles, who was mayor of the little town that I have described to you as most inhospitable to passion or adventure. Although it was a solemn occasion, the *fête du roi*, kept on Saint Louis's Day and always highly honored by these aristocrats, these political quietists who had devised that mystic phrase of pure loyalty, 'No matter what, long live the king!' — still nothing more was going on in the rooms than what took place there every day of the week. In other words, the company were at cards."

"I must ask your pardon for talking about myself; it is bad taste, but necessary for once. I was still in my teens; but thanks to an exceptional upbringing, I had more of an inkling of the secrets of life and love than is generally possessed at that age. I was less like a great awkward school-boy, whose eyes have never looked on anything outside his textbooks, than an inquisitive girl, one of the sort who educate themselves by listening at keyholes and pondering for hours over what they have heard there. The whole town crowded that evening to my uncle's house, and as always — all things were eternal in this world of mummies, who only shook loose their wrappings to wield the cards — the company was divided into two sections, those who played and the young ladies who did not. Mummies, too, the poor girls destined to take their niche one after another in the catacombs of celibacy, but whose faces, sparkling with a useless vitality and a freshness no man would ever enjoy, fascinated my eager gaze."

"Among them all, there was perhaps only one, Mademoiselle Herminie de Stasseville, whose fortune allowed her to contemplate a marriage of love, without derogation. I was not old enough, or else I was too old, to mingle with this bevy of young beauties, whose whisperings were every now and again interrupted by a frank peal of laughter or half-stifled giggle. A prey to a boy's burning self-consciousness, at once a delight and a torment to him, I had taken refuge in a seat near the god of tricks, Marmor de Karkoel, whose fervent admirer I was. Friendship of course was out of the question between us. But sentiment has its secret hierarchy, and it is no uncommon thing to see, in undeveloped natures, occult sympathies existing that nothing definite or demonstrable will account for. Children, like the masses, who are only grown-up children, must have a chief to reverence; and Karkoel was my chief."



"He often used to visit my father, a great whist player like all the men of his circle. Moreover, he had frequently taken part in our athletic recreations, in which he had displayed before my brothers and myself a vigor and suppleness that bordered on the marvelous. Like the Duc d'Enghien, he could clear a seventeen-foot brook and think nothing of it. This alone was bound to seduce lads like ourselves, who were being brought up to be soldiers; but this was not the mysterious magnet that drew me so irresistibly to the man. It must surely have been that his personality acted on my imagination with all the force exceptional beings exert over others equally exceptional, for a commonplace nature is always a safeguard against higher influences, as a bag of wool serves to stop cannon balls. I cannot tell what wild dreams were suggested to my fancy by that brow, modeled, you would have said, in the substance watercolor painters call *Sienna earth*, by those sinister eyes under their narrow lids, by the marks unknown storms of passion had left behind them on the Scotchman's frame like the four bludgeon strokes of the hangman on a criminal on the wheel. What fascinated me most of all, however, were his hands, the softest, most civilized hands, in which all signs of savage strength ended at the wrist, and which could deal the cards around with that astounding rapidity that was like a revolving flame and had so impressed Herminie de Stasseville the first time she saw it.

"That evening, in the corner where the whist table stood, the Venetian shutter was half closed and the players looked as somber as the half-light that surrounded them. It was a champions' game. The Methuselah of marquises, Monsieur de Saint-Albans, was Marmor's partner, while the Comtesse du Tremblay had for her the Chevalier de Tharsis, an officer in the regiment of Provence before the Revolution and a knight of Saint Louis, one of those old men who are now extinct, who straddled two centuries yet were not giants. At one particular moment of the game, in consequence of a movement of Madame du Tremblay's hands to pick up her cards, one of the diamonds that sparkled on her finger, caught in the shadow that the darkened window threw over the green table, making it a heavier green than ever, a sudden glint of light, which, meeting the facets of the stone at some subtle angle no human art is cunning enough to repeat, threw out an electric shaft of white brilliancy so dazzling it almost hurt the eyes like a flash of lightning.

"'Eh, what! What is it flashes so?' shrilled the Chevalier de Tharsis in a voice thin as his legs.

"'And who is it coughs so?' chimed in the Marquis de Saint-Albans simultaneously, disturbed in his rapt attention to the game by a dread-



ful, hollow cough, and turning toward Herminie, who was working an embroidered collar for her mother.

"My diamond and my daughter," responded the Comtesse du Tremblay, a smile on her thin lips, answering both inquiries at once.

"How superb your diamond is, Madame!" exclaimed the chevalier. "I have never seen it shine so brilliantly as it does tonight; it would force the most myopic to notice it."

"With this, they finished the game, and the Chevalier de Tharsis took the countess's hand in his own, saying, 'May I...?'"

"The countess languidly removed her ring and threw it over to the chevalier on the card table.

"The old nobleman examined it with interest, turning it about like a kaleidoscope. But light is often tricky and capricious, and fall as it might on the facets of the stone, it struck out no second flash to compare with the sudden, startling gleam of a moment ago.

"Herminie got up and went to the window to push open the shutter, that the daylight might fall better on her mother's ring and bring out its full beauty.

"This done, she resumed her seat and, resting her elbow on the table, fixed her eyes also on the prismatic jewel; but another fit of coughing seized her, a terrible, whistling cough that injected the pearly whites of her beautiful blue eyes with blood, reddening the normal purity of their pellucid depths.

"And wherever did you get that fearful cough, my dear?" asked the Marquis de Saint-Albans, more taken up with the girl than the ring, with the human than the mineral jewel.

"I don't know, really," she answered lightly with the heedlessness of youth, which cannot realize that life is not eternal. "Perhaps it was walking in the night air by the pond at Stasseville."

"I was struck by the group the four of them made. The red light of the setting sun beat in at the open window. The Chevalier de Tharsis was looking at the diamond; Monsieur de Saint-Albans at Herminie; Madame du Tremblay at Karkoel, who himself was looking absentmindedly at the queen of diamonds he held in his hand. But what struck me most was Herminie. The 'Rose of Stasseville' was pale, actually paler than her mother. The purple of the dying day, throwing its transparent reflection over her pallid cheeks, gave her the look of a victim, the face reflected in a mirror silvered, so it seemed, with blood instead of quicksilver.

"All of a sudden a shiver ran through my nerves, and a lightning flash of memory startled me with the invincible brutality of those ideas which violate one's mind but fecundate it.



"About a fortnight before, I had gone one morning to Marmor de Karkoel's rooms. It was quite early, and I had found him alone. None of the players who came every morning to play cards with him had yet arrived. When I entered, he was standing before his writing desk, apparently engaged in some very delicate operation, requiring extreme attention and great steadiness of hand. His head was bent over his work, so that I could not see his face. In his right hand he held a small vial of some black, shiny substance (it looked just like the tip of a broken dagger), and from this microscopic vial he was pouring some mysterious liquid into the cavity of a ring.

"What the devil are you doing?" I called out to him, coming forward. But he cried in a voice of command: 'Stop where you are! Not a step nearer or you'll make my hand shake, and what I am doing now is more difficult, and far more dangerous, than to break a corkscrew at forty paces with a pistol liable to burst at any moment.'

"He was alluding to a little adventure we had had a while before. We were amusing ourselves by shooting with the worst pistols we could possibly get hold of, so that the marksman's skill might be brought out in a stronger light by the very imperfection of his weapon, and we had very nearly blown our brains out with one that burst its barrel.

"He succeeded in insinuating a few drops of the unknown liquid into the hollow ring, letting them fall one by one from the pointed tip of the vial. This done, he shut the ring carefully and tossed it into one of the drawers of his writing desk, as if desirous of hiding it from inspection.

"I then noticed he wore a glass mask.

"Since when,' I said in a rallying tone, 'have you been dabbling in chemistry? Are you compounding a specific against losing at whist?'

"I'm not compounding anything,' he replied. 'But what's inside there (pointing to the black vial) is a specific against all the ills of life,' adding with the grim humor of the land of suicides from which he hailed: 'It is the sharper's pack that insures a man against losing his last game with Destiny.'

"And what poison is it?' I asked him, taking up the vial, the shape of which roused my curiosity.

"The most exquisite of all the Indian poisons,' he returned, removing his mask. 'To breathe it can be deadly, and, no matter how absorbed into the system, there is no need whatever to be anxious, even if it does not kill right off. You lose nothing by the delay, for its effect is as sure as it is secret; it attacks slowly, almost languidly, but still infallibly the very sources of life itself, striking inward and developing deep down in the organs it assails, some disease of the kind everybody is familiar with



and the symptoms of which are so well known to physicians that they would quite disarm suspicion and be a sufficient answer to any accusation of poisoning, even supposing such a charge at all likely to be made. In India they say the mendicant fakirs compound the drug with substances of an extreme rarity, known to themselves alone and found only in the remote highlands of Tibet. Its action is rather to dissolve away the cords of life than to rupture them. In this it conforms to the Indian character, so gentle and apathetic, to which death is but slumber, and a death bed a soft and restful couch of lotus. It is excessively difficult, in fact next to impossible, to procure. If you only knew all the risks I ran to get this vial from a woman who professed to love me. I have a friend, an officer like myself in the English service, and like me now home from India, where he has spent seven years of his life. He sought this poison with all the frenzied energy of an Englishman's caprice — and some day, when you have lived longer, you will understand what that is. Well! he could never find the real thing, though more than once he bought wretched imitations at more than their weight in gold. In despair he has lately written to me from England, enclosing me one of his rings and praying me to put into it some drops of this elixir of death. And that is what I was doing when you came in.'

"What he told me did not surprise me. Men are so constituted that, without any evil intention or sinister thought, they take a pleasure in having poison in their possession, as they do having weapons. They hoard the means of spreading death and destruction around them, as misers hoard gold. They say to themselves: 'If I wanted to kill!' just as the others say: 'If I wanted to spend!' The same childish fancy dominates both. I was no more than a child myself at the time, and I found it quite natural that Marmor de Karkoel, who had come back from India, should possess this strange, unique, exotic poison, and among the kandjars and native arrows he had brought from foreign parts in his soldier's chest, should have this vial of black agate, this plaything of death and devastation, to show me. When I had sufficiently turned and twisted about in my fingers the pretty, polished trinket, which perhaps some dancing girl had worn suspended between the topaz globes of her bosom and impregnated its porous substance with the golden sweat of her body, I dropped it into a cup standing on the mantel piece and thought no more about it.

"Well, you will hardly believe it, but it was the recollection of this very vial that now flashed across my mind! Herminie's look of suffering, her pallor, and the hacking cough that seemed to issue from lungs flaccid and spongy with disease, through whose substance perhaps some



of those deep lesions were even now eating their way, which are known to medicine — am I not right, Doctor? — under the terribly picturesque name of *caverns*, the ring that by a strange coincidence suddenly darted out so extraordinary a gleam of vivid brilliance just as the girl was seized with her fit of coughing, as if the spark of the fatal stone had been the murderer's joyous heartbeat, the incidents of my morning visit, which had until then entirely slipped my memory but were now instantly revived in perfect clearness — all this came rushing in a flood of thought into my head! But yet between the past and present what real connection could I find! The inference I had drawn involuntarily in my own mind was manifestly absurd. I was horrified at my atrocious thoughts and endeavored to crush them down, to extinguish this misleading glimmer, this flash of suspicion, that had flared up in my brain like the flash of the countess's diamond across the green table! To steady my wits, and crush beneath it the silly, wicked notion I had for a moment allowed myself to entertain, I turned a scrutinizing eye on Marmor de Karkoel and the Comtesse du Tremblay.

"Their whole attitude and look gave but one answer — the thing I had dared to fancy was preposterous! There stood Marmor the same as ever, his eyes still gazing at his queen of diamonds, as if she, and she only, represented the fixed and final passion of his life. Madame du Tremblay on her part wore in brow and lips and countenance the calmness that never deserted her — not even when she was aiming an epigram, for her sarcasm was like a bullet, the only instrument of death that kills without a stir of passion, whereas the sword partakes of the anger and excitement of the hand that wields it. They were two abysses, face to face; but while Karkoel was dark and shadowy as night, the pale Madame du Tremblay was clear and inscrutable as space itself. She held her glittering eyes fixed on her partner with an indifferent, impassive gaze. But as the Chevalier de Tharsis seemed as though he would never finish his examination of the ring, the ring that enclosed the mystery I so longed to penetrate, she had taken from her belt a big bouquet of mignonette and began to inhale its fragrance with an intensity of sensual satisfaction no one would ever have expected from a woman so little given to voluptuous pleasures. She closed her eyes in a sort of mysterious, languorous swoon and with a passionate avidity seized in her thin colorless lips several stems of the fragrant flower, crushing them between her teeth, her eyes once more wide open and fixed on Karkoel's face with a wild look of almost idolatrous surrender. Was it a signal, a token, a sign of complicity between two lovers, this crushing and devouring of flowers without a word? Frankly, I thought it was.



She tranquilly restored the ring to its place on her finger when at last the chevalier was done admiring it, and the game went on again, discreet, silent, and somber, as if nothing had interrupted it."

At this point the speaker paused again. Indeed, there was no need for him to hurry; he held us all spellbound by his tale. It may be that the whole merit of the story lay in his manner of telling it. When the voice stopped, you could plainly hear the audience breathing in the silence that ensued. Over my alabaster shield, the Comtesse de Damnaglia's shoulder, I could discern the marks of excited interest on every face, nuanced and various. Involuntarily I looked for Sibylle's face, for the face of that wild child who had protested so at the very start of the story. I should have liked to watch the horror grow and gleam in her dark eyes — eyes that make you think of the gloomy, sinister Canal Orfano in Venice, for more than one heart will someday drown in their depths. But she was no longer on her mother's sofa. Uncertain how the tale would end, the careful baroness had doubtless given her some private signal to slip away unseen, and she had left the room.

"As a matter of fact," the narrator resumed, "what was there after all in anything I had seen to move me so strongly and eat like an acid into the tablets of my memory, for time has not even now effaced a single outline of the scene? I can still see Marmor de Karkoel's face and the countess's expression of crystallized calm, melting for one emotional instant, when the scent of mignonette was inhaled and the poor flowers were ground between her teeth with something very like a shiver of voluptuous satisfaction.

"All this has remained clear-cut in my memory, and you will see why. These circumstances, the connection of which I could not then properly understand, half revealed as they were by an intuition I blamed myself for harboring, a tangled skein of the possible and impossible, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, subsequently received a spark of light which dissipated their obscurity once and for all and brought order out of the chaos of my mind.

"As I think I have already told you, I was sent to school very late. The last two years of my education passed without my coming home at all. Accordingly it was at school that I first heard, through letters from my relatives, of Mademoiselle Herminie de Stasseville's death, who had succumbed, they told me, to a wasting disease no one had thought serious until the very end, when the illness had become incurable. The news, which they told me without commentary of any kind, froze my blood with the same chill of horror I had before experienced in my uncle's drawing room when I first heard the cough that sounded a death



toll and had suddenly roused such fearful suspicions in my mind. Any who can enter into the more sacred feelings of the soul will understand me when I say I had not the heart to ask a single question about the poor girl's death, thus snatched away from her mother's love and life's brightest hopes. My thoughts on the subject were too tragic for me to speak of it to any living being.

"On returning to my father's house later on, I found the town of ——— much altered; for in the course of years towns alter as much as women and grow quite unrecognizable. The year 1830 was past and over. Since Charles X had passed through the town on his way to take ship at Cherbourg, most of the noble families I had known during my childhood lived in seclusion in the surrounding châteaux. The political events had hit these families the harder since they had fully expected their party to be victorious, and they now felt all the bitterness of disappointed hopes. In fact, they had witnessed the moment when birthright, elevated once again by the only veritable statesman of the Restoration, was to reestablish French society on the only true basis of its grandeur and its strength; then, by a sudden and unexpected turn of fortune, they had seen this cherished idea, both appropriate and just, an idea that had shone in the eyes of these men, gallant dupes of their monarchic devotion, a recompense for all their ruin and misfortunes, a last shred of vair and ermine with which to line their coffin and make their last sleep less hard — they had seen this idea perish beneath the blow of public opinion that had proven itself impervious to enlightenment and intractable to discipline. The little town so often referred to in my story had become a mere desert of closed shutters and barred gates. The Revolution of July had frightened away the English, and they left a town whose habits and customs had been so ruptured by the force of events.

"My first care was to inquire what had become of Monsieur Marmor de Karkoel. I was told he had gone back to India by order of his government. The individual who gave me this information was none other than the Chevalier de Tharsis, one of the players of the famous — famous at any rate to me — 'diamond game,' and his eye, as he replied, fixed mine with all the look of a man who is eager and anxious to be questioned. Almost before I knew it (so quick are men to divine the workings of each other's minds, long before the will has had time to act), I found myself asking him:

"And Madame du Tremblay de Stasseville, what of her?"

"'You have heard something?' he replied with an air of mystery, as if we had a hundred pairs of ears around us to hear all we said, instead of being entirely alone, as was the case.



"Oh, no!" I answered; "I know nothing."

"She is dead," he then told me. "Dead of a chest complaint, like her daughter. She died a month after that infernal Marmor de Karkoel left town."

"What has that to do with it?" I could not help interrupting him. "And why mention Marmor de Karkoel's name at all?"

"It is really true, then, you knew nothing whatever about it!" exclaimed the old man. "Well, then! my good sir, it appears she was his mistress. At least so it was said, when the affair was discussed at the time in whispers. Now no one dares so much as mention it. But she was a hypocrite of the first order, this countess! I tell you she was born so, as a woman is born blonde or brunette. She raised falsehood to a fine art, until it was indistinguishable from truth, so simple and natural was she through it all, so absolutely without effort or affectation of any kind. Her skill in deceiving was so masterly, nobody till quite lately even suspected it was a skill at all — and yet some rumors did leak out that were promptly hushed up for fear of the very horror they excited. According to these, the Scotchman, whose sole passion seemed to be card playing, was not only the lover of the countess, who never received him at her house as everybody else did, and when occasion offered never failed to scarify him with her epigrams, reserving her most impish sarcasm for him in preference to any of her acquaintances. He was her lover, yes; but that was not all! There was something worse behind. The god of tricks, it was darkly whispered, had "tricked" mother and daughter both! Poor little Herminie adored him in silence. Mademoiselle Ernestine de Beaumont will tell you so, if you ask her. It was a fatality. Did he love the girl? Did he love the mother? Did he love both? Did he love neither? Did he perhaps only find the mother useful to cloak the game he was playing with the other? Who can tell? This part of the tale is wrapped in mystery. The one thing certain is that the mother, whose soul was as harsh as her body, conceived a hatred for her daughter that contributed not a little to hasten her untimely death."

"They say that!" I interrupted, more dismayed at my suspicions having proved well founded than had they been entirely unjustified. "But who can really know? Karkoel was no braggart. He was not the man to babble secrets. Nothing could ever be drawn from him about his former life; was he likely to have suddenly grown talkative and told all the world of his relations with the Comtesse du Tremblay?"

"Certainly not!" replied the Chevalier de Tharsis emphatically. "They made a pair, the two hypocrites. He went as he came, without giving any of us grounds for saying he was anything but a devoted whist player."



But, perfect as was the countess's discretion, irreproachable as was the exterior she presented to the world, her maids, in whose eyes no mistress is a heroine, related how she would shut herself up alone with poor Herminie and how, after long hours alone together, they would come out each paler than the other, but the daughter always the more tearful and red-eyed of the two.'

"'You know no other details, nothing certain, then?' I said, to make him talk and so get more light on these obscurities. 'Yet you know as well as I do what servants' gossip amounts to. We should probably learn more from Mademoiselle de Beaumont.'

"'Mademoiselle de Beaumont!' cried Tharsis. 'Ah! there was no love lost between those two, the countess and Mademoiselle de Beaumont! They hated each other, because each had the same biting tongue! The survivor, you will find, never mentions the dead woman but with menacing eyes and a treacherous implication of knowing more than she cares to tell. There can be no doubt she takes a pleasure in insinuating the most abominable atrocities, but only really knows of one — and that can hardly be called atrocious — poor Herminie's love for Karkoel.'

"'And that is not knowing much, Chevalier,' I broke in. 'If we could hear all the secrets young girls tell each other in confidence, we would conclude that every child who dreams vaguely of a lover is in love. Now you will admit that a man like Karkoel was just the sort of romantic figure to set a girl dreaming.'

"'True enough!' returned the old chevalier. 'But we have something more than girls' confidential chatter to go upon. You will remember — but no, you were too young at the time! Anyhow, it was much remarked upon in our little society that Madame de Stasseville, who had never shown much preference before for anything, certainly not for flowers (indeed I defy you or any man to say what the woman's predilections were), began toward the end of life to wear a bouquet of mignonette constantly at her belt; and at the whist table, and indeed on all occasions, she was in the habit of breaking off the stems and chewing them. In fact one fine day Mademoiselle de Beaumont actually asked Herminie, with a note of mockery in her voice, how long her mother had been a herbivore.'

"'Oh, yes! I remember perfectly,' I answered. And truly I had never forgotten the wild-beast way, at once amorous and cruel-looking, in which the countess had inhaled the fragrance of her bouquet and chewed the flowers during that game of whist which had played so large a part in my boyish recollections.

"'Well, you must know,' the old fellow went on, 'the mignonette



came from a magnificent flower pot Madame de Stasseville had in her drawing room. The time had passed when strong scents made her ill. We had seen the day when she could not bear them, and she used to tell us in a languid voice that she had been nearly killed during her last confinement, with a bunch of tuberose. Nowadays she delighted in them with an almost passionate ardor. Her drawing room was as stifling as a greenhouse whose windows have been kept shut until midday. Indeed two or three delicate ladies of her acquaintance stopped visiting her for no other reason. It was a great and sudden change; but it was attributed to sickness and nerves. After her death, when the room had to be dismantled — for her son's guardian soon marched off that young scamp, who by the way is as rich as a fool of his sort has every right to be, to a boarding school — the mignonette was transplanted to the open air, and guess what they found buried beneath the roots! — the corpse of a baby, that had been born alive."

The narrative was cut short at this point by a perfectly genuine cry of horror from two or three of the women present, even though they had severed all ties with natural emotions. These had left them for quite some time; but I tell you, they returned for the occasion! The rest showed more self-control displaying the slightest, but nonetheless irrepressible, shudder.

"A pretty fix, and a pretty fixture!" put in the Marquis de Gourdes at this moment, with his usual flippancy, that amiable little perfumed swine, known among his friends as 'the last marquis' — one of those people who would crack a joke behind a coffin, or even inside one.

"Where did the infant come from?" asked the Chevalier de Tharsis, kneading the contents of his tortoiseshell snuff box. "Whose child was it? Did it die a natural death? Had it been murdered? Who was the murderer?" These questions were all equally unanswerable but gave rise to all sorts of abominable conjectures exchanged in awestruck whispers.

"You are right, Chevalier! They are unanswerable," I responded, more than ever determined to bury within my own bosom any more complete knowledge I believed myself to possess. "It will always remain a mystery — and may it grow more and more impenetrable till the day when it shall be utterly and entirely forgotten."

"As a matter of fact," he returned, "there are but two living creatures in all the world who really know the facts, and," he added with a sly smile, "it is highly improbable either of these will make them public. One is our friend Marmor de Karkoel, now gone back to the East Indies, his chest stuffed with the gold he has won from us. We shall never see *him* any more. The other..."



"What other?" I asked in astonishment.

"Ah! The other," he resumed, with what he intended as a cunning wink. "We have still less to fear from the other. This is the countess's father confessor. You know, fat Abbé de Trudaine, who, by the way, has just been nominated for the see of Bayeux."

"Chevalier," I broke in, struck by a thought that threw more light than anything else on the woman's nature, which I now felt convinced was naturally secretive rather than hypocritical, as a purblind observer like the Chevalier de Tharsis called her, merely because she had thrown the screen of a strong will over the indulgence of her passions, perhaps to double by that means the stormy satisfactions she enjoyed. "Chevalier, you are mistaken. The approval of death never broke down the wall of reserve in that stern spirit, worthier of sixteenth-century Italy than of modern times. I tell you the Comtesse de Stasseville died as she had lived. The voice of the priest beat in vain against the granite of her resolution, and she carried her secret with her to the grave. If a death-bed repentance had indeed led her to entrust it to the minister of God's mercy, you may be quite sure nothing would ever have been found in the countess's flower pot."

So ended the story. The narrator had kept his promise; he had told all he knew, though this was after all only the raveled ends of the complete romance. A long silence followed. Each member of the audience was wrapped in thought, endeavoring with what power of imagination he possessed, to combine the detached details, which were all he had to go on, and complete this real-life romance. In Paris, where raillery is so quick to throw emotion out the window, silence, in a roomful of clever people, after a story, is the most flattering of all marks of success.

"A very pretty game indeed, especially what lay beneath the cards!" at length remarked the Baronne de Saint-Alban, as inveterate a player as any old diplomat's wife. "What you say is very true! What is half seen makes a far deeper impression than if every card had been turned face up and every play of the game exposed."

"Verily, truth is stranger than fiction," observed the doctor sententiously.

"Ah! yes, and the same thing is so true both in music and life!" cried Mademoiselle Sophie de Revistal eagerly. "The highest expression of both comes far more from the silences than the chords."

She looked at her dear friend, the proud impassive Comtesse de Damnaglia, of the unbending carriage, who sat all the while biting the ivory and gold tip of her fan. What did the steel-blue eyes of the fair countess say? Well! I could not see her face, but her back, which was



studded with little beads of perspiration, had a tale of its own to tell. It is hinted that the Comtesse de Damnaglia is not unlike Madame de Stasseville in this, that she possesses a force of character sufficient to hide under an unruffled exterior the fierce emotions and occult satisfaction of an intensely passionate nature.

"You've quite spoiled for me the flowers I was so fond of," said his hostess, the Baronne de Mascranny, half turning around to the storyteller. And then, decapitating an innocent little bud that she took from her bosom and pulled to pieces, she added with a little shudder of horror:

"No! Never again! I shall never wear mignonette again!"

## AT A DINNER OF ATHEISTS

*Worthy of men who know no God.*

— Allen

NIGHT WAS JUST beginning to fall in the streets of ———. But it was already dark in the church of that little town in western France. Night always falls more quickly in churches than it does elsewhere, either because of the dark reflections of the stained-glass windows, when there are stained-glass windows, or because of the intertwining of pillars, so often compared to trees in a forest, and the shadows thrown by the arches. But the doors are not closed because night has fallen inside the edifice, anticipating the close of day. They generally remain open until the Angelus has rung — and sometimes even very much later, as on the eve of great festivals; for, in pious towns, many people confess before taking the sacrament the next day. At no hour of the day are country churches more frequented by church-goers than at this time in the evening, when work has ceased, daylight is dying, and the Christian soul prepares for the night — night which resembles death, and during which death may come. At that hour one fully realizes that the Christian religion was born in the catacombs and retains something of that melancholy. It is at this moment indeed that those who still believe in prayer like to come and kneel with their heads in their hands, in the mysterious night of the empty nave, which responds to the deepest wants of the human soul; for if we worldly and passionate ones feel more intimacy and agitation when we are alone in the dusk with the woman we love, why should it not be the same for religious souls with God, when the tabernacles are surrounded by darkness, and they can whisper into His ear in the obscurity?



Thus did the pious souls, who had come to say their evening prayers according to custom, seem to be speaking to Him this evening in the church of ———. In the town, still gray in the misty autumn twilight, neither the street lamps nor the small lamp of the statue of the Virgin in front of the convent of the Varengerie, which no longer exists, were yet lighted. Vespers were over two hours ago, for it was Sunday, and the cloud of incense that long formed a blueish screen over the choir had evaporated. Deep night spread over the church its shadowy mantle, unfurled from the arches like a sail from a mast. Two long thin candles on each side of the nave, and the sacristy lamp, like a little fixed star in the darkness of the choir, threw a ghostly glimmer rather than a light through the flood of shadows. In this filtered twilight it was possible to see indistinctly but impossible to recognize anyone. You could see here and there in the half-light a few black spots, darker than the grayness that surrounded them, a few bent forms, the white caps of kneeling women, and one or two capes with their hoods lowered — but that was all. You heard rather than saw. All those mouths praying in a low voice in the sonorous silence produced a curious whisper like the murmur of an anthill of souls visible only to the eye of God.

Sometimes this murmur would be broken by a sigh or the noise of one of the side doors swinging on its hinges and shutting behind a newcomer; the sound of a clog on the tiles or a chair knocked over in the darkness; or from time to time there would come a cough — one of those reedy coughs that the devout try to hold back out of respect for the holy echoes of the Lord's house. But these noises were but the rapid passing of so many sounds and did not interrupt the fervent worshippers in the eternal monotonous murmur of their prayers.

And so none of the faithful who assembled every evening in the church of ——— took any notice of a man whose presence would assuredly have astonished more than one of them had there been light sufficient to recognize him. For he was no frequenter of the church. He was never seen there. He had never put his foot inside the edifice since he had returned to his native town after years of absence.

Why had he entered this evening? What feeling, or idea, or project had caused him to cross the threshold of a door before which he passed several times a day without paying any attention to it? He was an aloof man, and his pride must have stooped as much as his shoulders when he passed under the little arched door, weather-stained by the dampness of the rainy climate of the west of France. There was poetry in that fiery brain. When he entered this unfamiliar place, was he struck by the almost funereal aspect of the church, which resembled a crypt (for it



was built below the level of the street and one descended several steps on entering, so that the doorway was higher than the altar)? He had never read the story of Saint Bridget, but if he had, he would, when he entered that nocturnal atmosphere full of mysterious whispers, have thought of her vision of Purgatory, that bleak and terrible dormitory where sighs and whispers emanated from the walls.

Whatever his impressions may have been, it is certain that he stopped in the midst of the side aisle as though his memory were at fault. It was evident that he sought someone or something he could not find in the shadows. However, when his eyes were accustomed to the darkness and he could see the shapes of things around him, he perceived an old beggar woman, crouching rather than kneeling, at the end of the "paupers' bench," reading her rosary. He touched her on the shoulder and asked her where the Virgin's chapel and the confessional of one of the parish priests whom he named were.

The old beggar woman, who for the last fifty years, had formed part of the furniture of the church and belonged to it almost as much as the gargoyles, gave him the information he required, and the man threaded his way through the disarranged chairs that encumbered the aisle, and stood before the confessional that is at the end of the chapel. He remained there with his arms crossed — the attitude always adopted by men who do not come to pray and who wish to assume a suitably serious attitude. Several lady members of the congregation of the Holy Rosary, who were then praying in the chapel, would have noted, had they been able to see this man, what I will not call the *impiety* but rather *nonpiety* of his attitude.

Generally, on evenings when there was confession, there stood alight, beneath the figure of the Virgin, a twisted candle of yellow wax, which lighted the chapel; but nearly all the faithful had taken communion that morning, and there was no one in the confessional save the priest, who was meditating in solitude, and he had come out, extinguished the yellow-wax candle, and returned to his wooden box to resume his meditations in the darkness, which prevents all external distraction and thus aids contemplation. Was it intentionally or by chance, caprice or economy or some other reason, that the priest had performed this simple act? At any rate, it had saved the man who entered the chapel from being recognized during the few instants he was there.

The priest saw him through the little grating in the door and put out the candle before he approached, and threw open the door, but without moving from his seat; and the man, unfolding his arms, handed the priest a small object that he drew from his breast.



"Here, Father," he said in a low but distinct voice. "I have carried it about me many a long day."

Nothing more was said. The priest, as though he understood the matter, took the object and quietly closed the door of the confessional. The ladies of the congregation of the Holy Rosary imagined that the man who had spoken to the priest was about to kneel and confess, and were extremely astonished to see him nimbly descend the steps and regain the aisle by which he had come.

But if they were surprised, he was still more so when, halfway toward the door by which he had entered and by which he had intended to leave, he was seized suddenly by a pair of strong arms, and a laugh, which was abominably scandalous in such a holy place, burst forth within two inches of his face. Happily for the teeth that laughed, he recognized them, being so close to his face.

"Good God" said the laugher in a low voice, but not so low that those who were near could not hear the blasphemy and irreverence. "What the devil are you doing, Mesnil, in a church at this hour? We are not in Spain now, as we were when we used to rumple the veils of the nuns of Àvila."

The person he called Mesnil made an angry gesture.

"Be quiet!" he said in a low but commanding voice. "Are you drunk? You swear in a church as though you were in a barracks. Go on! No foolishness, and let us both get out of here decently."

And he quickened his steps and passed, closely followed by "the other," the small, low door, and when they were out in the street and could speak out loud, "the other" said: "May all the lightnings of hell burn you up, Mesnil! Are you going to turn monk? Are you going to eat their Hosts? You, Mesnilgrand! You, the captain of the Chamboran regiment, in a church, like a tonsured cleric!"

"You were there yourself!" said Mesnil calmly.

"I went to follow you! I saw you enter and was more astonished — on my word of honor — than if I had seen my mother violated. I said to myself, 'What is he doing in that nest of priests?' Then I thought there must be some petticoat at the bottom of it, and I wanted to see what *grisette*, or *grande dame* of the town, you were after."

"No, I was about my own business, my good fellow," replied Mesnil, with the cool insolence of utter contempt that is intended to be evident.

"Then I am more devilishly surprised than ever."

"My good fellow," said Mesnil, stopping, "ever since the creation of the world there have been men like me specially intended to astonish . . . men like you."



And turning his back and quickening his steps, like a man who does not mean to be followed, he ascended the Rue de Gisors to the Place Thurin, in one of the corner houses of which he resided.

He lived with his father, old M. de Mesnilgrand, as he was called in the town when they spoke of him. He was an old man, rich and miserly (it was claimed), "hard as a stone" — that was the expression they used — who had for many years lived in seclusion, and saw no company except during the three months when his son, who resided in Paris, came to stay with him. Then old M. de Mesnilgrand, who ordinarily did not see so much as a cat, invited and received all of his son's old friends and regimental comrades, and gave such sumptuous dinners that all the Rabelaisian gourmands of the town talked about them.

To give you an idea, there was, at the time, in the town of ———, a famous host, a financier, who had, when he arrived, produced the effect of a six-horse carriage entering a church. He was a rather slim financier for such a large man, but his nature had made him a great cook. It was said that in 1814 he had brought Louis XVIII, heading for Ghent, his arrondissement's cashbox in one hand and a truffle purée in the other, which seemed to have been cooked by the seven demons of the deadly sins, it was so delicious; Louis XVIII had taken the cashbox without so much as a thank you, as was his wont, but in recognition of the purée, he decorated the dominant stomach of this brilliant chef, forced into finances, with the black ribbon of Saint-Michel, which was accorded only to scholars and artists. With his wide moiré ribbon always pinned to his white vest and its gold decoration brightening his paunch, M. Deltocq (for his name was Deltocq), who in the days of Saint-Louis had carried a sword and had worn a French velvet outfit, proud and insolent as thirty-six powdered English coachmen, and who believed that all would yield before the empire of his sauces, was for the town of ——— a man of almost luminous vanity and splendor. Well! It was with this lofty culinary figure, who boasted of being able to make forty-nine types of clear soup and could not even count the number of cream soups — they were infinite! — that old M. de Mesnilgrand's cook competed, and to whom she gave some worry, during the stays of Mesnilgrand's son in the town of ———.

He was proud of his son, but the old man was not happy and had good reason. His "young man," as he called him — although he was more than forty — had had his career ended by the same blow that had reduced the empire to dust and reversed the fortunes of the man who was then known simply as The Emperor, as though his office and glory had obliterated his name. The young Mesnilgrand had left home at eighteen, but



he was of the stuff of which great generals are made, and he had fought in all of the empire's wars, but Waterloo had ruined all his hopes and ambitions. He was one of the men who was not taken into the army at the Restoration, for he had not been able to resist the temptation of joining his old commander after the return from Elba — an event that seemed to deprive many able men of their own free will.

Captain Mesnilgrand — of whom the officers of that romantically brave regiment, Chamboran, said: "A man may be as brave as Mesnilgrand, but braver he cannot be" — saw many of his regimental comrades, who had not seen nearly so much service as he had, become colonels in all the best regiments of the royal guard, right under his nose; and though he was not jealous, it was a cruel blow to him! He had an intensely sensitive nature.

Military discipline — at a time when it was nearly as strict as it was among the Romans — was the only thing capable of restraining his passions, which were so violent that eighteen years before they had shocked his native town and nearly killed him. For, before he was eighteen, inordinate excesses with women had brought on a nervous disease, a kind of *tabes dorsalis*, for which he was obliged to have his spine burned with moxas.

This terrible remedy, which astonished the town as much as his excesses had astonished it, was held up by some of the fathers in the town as an example, in order to improve the morals of their sons, as terror is used to improve the morals of the masses. They were taken to see young Mesnilgrand burned. He survived the operation, the doctors said, thanks to his "infernal" constitution, that was the word they used because he endured so well the flames. This exceptional constitution withstood the moxas and, later, withstood fatigue, wounds, and all the hardships that afflict a soldier; and Mesnilgrand, still robust and in his prime, found himself without the great military career of which he had dreamed, without a goal, his sword nailed to its scabbard, his spirits exasperated to the point of fury.

If we searched through history for a man to whom Mesnilgrand could be compared, we should be obliged to go back to the famous Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. An ingenious moralist explained the incongruities of our destinies by comparing men to portraits — in some, the head and bust have been cut off by their frames, while in others men are dwarfed or disappear entirely in the absurd immensity of theirs. Mesnilgrand, the son of a simple country squire, compelled to live and die in the obscurity of private life, after having missed the great historic glory for which he was intended, experienced all the terrible force



of long, continued fury and envenomed rage which devoured the vitals of Charles the Bold, who is also called Charles the Terrible. Waterloo, which had thrown him out of employment, had been at once what Granson and Morat had been for that human thunderbolt who found his end in the snows of Nancy. Only there was neither snow nor Nancy for Mesnilgrand, a cashiered captain. It was believed that he would kill himself or go mad, but he did not kill himself, nor did he go mad. He was so already, the wags — who are found everywhere — said. Though he did not kill himself — and considering his nature his friends *could have* but didn't ask him why he did not — he was not a man to let his heart be eaten by a vulture without an attempt to crush the vulture's beak. Like Alfieri, who knew nothing except how to break horses but learned Greek when he was forty, and even composed Greek verses, Mesnilgrand threw himself, or rather precipitated himself, into painting, that is to say, *that which was farthest removed from him*, precisely as a man, in order to make sure of killing himself, will climb to the seventh floor before throwing himself out of a window.

He knew nothing of drawing, but he became a painter, like Géricault, whom he had, I believe, known in the musketeers. He worked furiously — as though flying in the face of the enemy, he said with a bitter laugh — exhibited, made a sensation, did not exhibit again, destroyed his canvases after he had painted them, and set to work again with indefatigable zeal. This officer, who had lived sword in hand and ridden all across Europe, now spent his life in front of an easel, wielding a paintbrush, and was so disgusted with war (the disgust of those who adore) that what he chiefly painted was landscape — landscapes like those he had ravaged.

While he was painting them he chewed some curious mixture of opium and tobacco, which he smoked day and night; for he had had made a hookah of his own invention which he could smoke even while he was asleep. But neither narcotic, nor drugs, nor any of the poisons with which men paralyze or slowly kill themselves could lull to sleep the monster of fury which was never quieted within him and which he called the crocodile of his fountain — a phosphorescent crocodile in a fountain of fire. Others, who did not know him, long thought that he was one of the Carbonari. But those who knew him better were aware that there was too much talk and too much stupid liberalism about the Carbonari for a man of such strong character, who estimated all the petty foolishness of his time with shrewd perception. And except for his passions, the extravagance of which was sometimes limitless, he had the clear sense of reality which distinguishes the Normans.



He was never deluded into joining any conspiracy. He foretold the fate of General Berton. On the other hand, the democratic ideas to which the Imperialists inclined during the Restoration, so that they might conspire the better, repelled him instinctively. He was profoundly aristocratic, and not so merely by birth, caste, or social rank — he was so *by nature*, and would have been the same had he been the lowliest cobbler in the town. He was so, as Heine says, “by his manner of feeling,” and not like a bourgeois, like those parvenus who care only for external distinctions. He never wore his medals. His father, who saw that he was on the eve of becoming a colonel when the empire crumbled to pieces, had bought a barony for him; but he never used the title, and on his visiting cards, and for all the world, he was only the Chevalier de Mesnilgrand. Titles, deprived of all the political privileges they used to have, and of their status as real weapons, he valued no more than the rind of a sucked orange, and he laughed at them, even in the presence of those for whom they had an importance. He proved this one day in the little town of ———, which teemed with nobles and where the old landed gentry, now ruined and robbed by the Revolution, had, perhaps to console themselves, the inoffensive mania of assuming the title of count or marquis, which their families — which were very ancient and did not need them — had never borne. Mesnilgrand, who thought such claims ridiculous, resorted to a bold method of putting a stop to it. One evening, at a party given by one of the most aristocratic families in the town, he said to the servant: “Announce the Duc de Mesnilgrand.”

And the servant, much astonished, called out in a stentorian voice: “The Duc de Mesnilgrand!”

There was a general start throughout the company.

“My word!” he said, seeing the effect he had produced, “as everybody takes a title nowadays, I thought I would take that one.”

No one said a word. Some of the good-humored guests began to laugh in the corners, but the practice of using sham titles ceased. There are still knights-errant in the world. They no longer redress wrongs with sword and lance, but deflate ridiculous presumptions with satire, and Mesnilgrand was one of these knights.

He had a natural gift for sarcasm. But that was not the only gift that God had given him. Although force of character was the most prominent feature in his mental economy, his wit was nevertheless a great source of strength to him against others. No doubt if the Chevalier de Mesnilgrand had been a happy man he would not have been very witty, but being unhappy, he had the opinions of a desperate man, and when he was in good spirits, which was rarely, it was with the gaiety of a des-



perate man; and there is nothing that so fixes the kaleidoscope of wit and prevents it from turning, as the fixed idea of unhappiness.

But that which he most possessed and was of the greatest use to him, considering the passions that surged within his breast, was eloquence. It has been said of Mirabeau and may be said of all great orators: "If you had only heard him!" — and the expression seemed specially intended for him. You should have seen, during any discussion, his volcanic chest rising, his complexion becoming paler, his brow, furrowed with wrinkles — like a sea, in the hurricane of his wrath — and his pupils glaring from the whites of his eyes, as though they would strike those to whom he spoke, like two flaming bullets. You should have seen him breathless, gasping, his voice becoming more moving the more broken it became, irony making the foam upon his lips tremble long after he had finished speaking; after these fits, more sublime in his exhaustion than Talma as Orestes, magnificently killed yet not dying, his anger did not overcome him but was revived again the next day, or hour, or minute, like a phoenix rising from its ashes.

In fact, certain chords in his nature were always taut, and if you touched them, sounds would reverberate that would overthrow anyone imprudent enough to have done so.

"He spent the evening at our house," said a young lady to one of her friends, "and, my dear, he roared all the time. He is a demon. It will end by Monsieur de Mesnilgrand not being asked out at all."

Had it not been for the "bad form" of these outbreaks, which are not intended for drawing rooms or the people who inhabit them, he might perhaps have interested the young ladies who spoke of him with such mocking severity. Lord Byron was very fashionable in those days, and when Mesnilgrand was silent and reserved he somewhat resembled one of Byron's heroes. He did not have the regular beauty that cold-hearted young women seek. He was extremely ugly, but his pale and careworn face, under the chestnut hair that still looked youthful, his prematurely wrinkled forehead, like that of Lara or the Corsair, his broad leopardlike nose, his blue eyes bordered with a thread of blood, like those of fiery racehorses, gave him an appearance that agitated even the most mocking of the young ladies of ———. When he was present, even the greatest sniggerers sniggered no more.

Tall, strong, well-formed, although he stooped a little, as though life were too heavy an armor to bear, the Chevalier de Mesnilgrand wore, under his modern costume, the strange air you find in some old majestic family portraits. "He is a picture that has walked out of its frame," said a young lady, the first time she saw him enter a drawing room.



Moreover, Mesnilgrand crowned all these advantages by one which was better than all of them, in the eyes of young girls — he was always splendidly dressed. Perhaps it was a last remaining coquetry, a vestige of his career as a ladies' man, like the last pink ray of the setting sun across a bank of clouds behind which it has set. Or it might have been a trace of the Oriental luxury that he had formerly displayed as an officer of the Chamboran regiment, for when he was gazetted to the regiment he had made his miserly old father pay twenty thousand francs, simply for tigerskin saddlecloths and red boots. But the fact remains that no young man of Paris or London displayed more elegance than this misanthrope, who no longer belonged to the world of fashion and who, during the three months that he spent at ———, paid very few visits, and those he did not repeat.

He lived as he did in Paris, abandoning himself to painting all day until nightfall. He rarely walked around the neat and charming little town, with its dreamy aspect, built for dreamers, this town of poets, where perhaps there was not a single one. Sometimes when he passed down a street a shopkeeper would say to a stranger who remarked his proud bearing: "That is Commandant Mesnilgrand," as though Commandant Mesnilgrand ought to be known to everybody. If you saw him once, you did not forget him. His appearance struck you, as that of a man who asks nothing from the world, for if you ask nothing from the world you are above it, and then it will do any baseness for you. He never went to the cafés, like the other officers who had been dismissed from the army at the Restoration and with whom he never failed to shake hands when he met them. Provincial cafés disgusted his aristocratic nature. It was a question of taste. No one was horrified at that. His comrades were sure to find him at his father's house, at those magnificent feasts the old man gave when his son was staying with him, likened by the guests to those of Belshazzar, though they had never read the Bible.

At these dinners he sat opposite his son, and though he was old and looked like a character out of a comedy, you could see that the father had been in his time worthy of procreating the son of whom he was so proud. He was a tall, thin, old man, upright as the mast of a vessel, who proudly resisted the advance of age.

Always clad in a long frock coat of a dark color, which made him look even taller than he was, he appeared outwardly to have all the severe look of a thinker, or a man who no longer has any use for all the pomps and vanities of the world. He wore, and for many years had always worn, a cotton nightcap with a broad lilac band, but no one would



have dreamed of laughing at his nightcap, the traditional headgear of the *malade imaginaire*. Old M. de Mesnilgrand did not lend himself to comedy. He would have checked the laugh on the lips of Regnard and made the pensive look on Molière's face more pensive still. What the youth of this almost majestic G ronte or Harpagon had been was too remote for anyone to recollect. He had been (it was said) on the side of the Revolution, although he was related to Vicq-d'Azir, Marie-Antoinette's doctor, but this was short-lived. The well-to-do man, the landed proprietor, had triumphed over the man of ideas. But he had come out of the Revolution a political atheist, the way he had entered it a religious atheist, and these two atheisms combined had made him a sort of raging naysayer who would have frightened Voltaire.

He said little about his opinions, except to the men whom he invited to dine and meet his son, when he allowed glimmers of opinions to escape, which justified what was said of him in the town. The religious people and the nobility, of whom the town was full, looked upon him as an old reprobate whom it was impossible to see and who did himself justice by never visiting anyone.

His life was very quiet. He never went out. The boundaries of his garden and courtyard were for him the ends of the world. In the winter, he sat in the inglenook of the kitchen fireplace, to which he had wheeled a huge armchair covered in reddish-brown Utrecht velvet, where he sat silently, much to the annoyance of the servants, who did not dare to speak out loud before him, and they talked to one another in a low voice, as though they were in church. In the summer they were freed from his presence, for he kept to the dining room, which was cool, and sat reading the papers or some old books which he had bought at an auction and which had belonged to the library of some monastery; or he would sit arranging his receipts at an old maple writing table with copper corners, which he had brought down in order to save himself the trouble of going upstairs when his tenants came, although it was not an article of furniture suitable for a dining room. Whether anything besides the calculation of interest passed through his mind no one knew. His face, with a short and rather flat nose, white as wax and pitted with smallpox, did not reveal his thoughts, which were as difficult to guess as those of a cat purring by the side of the fire.

The smallpox that had marked him had also reddened his eyes and turned the lashes inward so much that he had been obliged to have them cut, and as it was often necessary to repeat this horrible operation, it had rendered his sight weak, so that when he spoke to you he was obliged to step backward a little and make an eye shade of his hand,



which gave him an air of mingled insolence and pride. Not even with a monocle could one give a more insolent stare than old M. de Mesnilgrand could obtain with his trembling hand placed to his eyebrows, in order that he might see you better when he spoke to you.

His voice was that of a man who has always had the right to command others — a voice that came from the head rather than the chest, as that of a man who has more head than heart — but he did not use it much. You might have said that he was as sparing of it as he was of his crown pieces. He economized it, but not as the centenarian Fontenelle did, who stopped in midsentence when a carriage passed, and resumed it when the noise had ceased. Old M. de Mesnilgrand was not like old Fontenelle, a cracked bit of porcelain, perpetually engaged in surveying his cracks. He was rather an old dolmen, solid as granite, and if he spoke little, it is because dolmens do speak little, like the gardens of La Fontaine. When he did speak, it was briefly, in the style of Tacitus. In conversation his words were engraved. His style was terse, even stony, for he had a caustic wit, and even the stones that he threw into other people's gardens always hit someone.

Formerly, like many other fathers, he had cried out against the follies and extravagances of his son, but since Mesnil — by that familiar abbreviation he designated his son — had been struck down like a Titan under the overturned mountain of the empire, the old man felt for him the respect of a man who has braved all the pitfalls of life and has found, in the end, that nothing is more beautiful than the spectacle of human force crushed under the stupidity of destiny!

He showed this in his manner, and his manner was expressive. When his son spoke before him, there was an air of rapt attention on the old wan face, which looked like a moon drawn with a white pencil on gray paper, with a little red chalk to mark the eyes, reddened by the small-pox. In fact, the best proof that he could give of his esteem for his son Mesnil was that during his stay he completely forgot his avarice, though that passion rarely relaxes its cold grip on the heart it has seized. He gave the famous dinners that kept M. Deltocq awake at night, dinners such as only the Devil prepares for his special favorites; and indeed were not all the guests great favorites of the Devil? "All the rascals and scoundrels in the town and the neighborhood can be found there," muttered the royalists and the religiously minded, who were still fired by the passions of 1815. "They must say infamous things, and perhaps do them," they added. The servants, who were not sent away after the dessert, as at the suppers of the Baron d'Holbach, spread around town all sorts of abominable reports as to what was said at these revels, and the scandal



became so great that the cook of old M. de Mesnilgrand was badgered by her friends, threatened that, as long as Mesnilgrand was in his father's house, the priest would not allow her to take the sacrament.

In the town of ——— there was as much horror felt over these feasts in the Place Thurin as the Christians felt in the Middle Ages for those feasts of the Jews at which they were alleged to profane the sacraments and cut children's throats. It is true that this horror was a little tempered by an envious longing to partake of these sensual feasts and by various accounts of these dinners that made the mouths of all the gourmands in the town water. In a little provincial town everything is known. The market is like the house with glass walls of the old Roman: it is a house without walls. It was known, down to the partridge or the snipe, what they were going to have and what they had had at each weekly dinner in the Place Thurin. At these feasts, which generally took place every Friday, they had the best fish and shellfish to be found in the market. They brazenly ate both fish and meat at these terrible but exquisite banquets, in order that the rule of abstinence and mortification prescribed by the Church might be the better transgressed.

That was really the intention of old M. de Mesnilgrand and his diabolical associates. It spiced up their dinner to eat meat on a Friday and, in addition to their meat, to eat delicious fish — fish fit for a cardinal. They were like that Neapolitan who said that her sorbet was delicious, but it would be much better if it were a sin to eat it. In these impious wretches it would have been better had it been not one sin but many, for all those who sat at this table were impious — upper crust, with scarlet crests, mortal enemies of the priesthood, which to them represented the Church — absolute and violent atheists, of which there were many at that time, when a peculiar form of atheism was very prevalent. For there were at that period many men of action, of intense energy, who had gone through the Revolution and the wars of the empire and had indulged in all the excesses of those terrible times. Their atheism was not that of the eighteenth century, from which, however, it had sprung. The atheism of the eighteenth century had pretensions to truth and thought. It reasoned, was sophistic, declamatory, and above all impertinent. But it did not possess the insolence of the ruffianly soldiers of the empire and the regicidal apostates of 1793. We, who have come after these men, too have our atheism; absolute, concentrated, scholarly, icy, hateful, implacably hateful, and having for all religious matters the hatred of the insect for the beam it bores into. But neither this atheism nor the other could give an idea of the frenzied atheism of the men of the beginning of the century, who being brought up like dogs by their



fathers, the Voltairians, had plunged their hands up to the shoulders in all the horrors of politics and war and their attendant corruptions.

After three or four hours of blasphemous eating and drinking, the dining room of old M. de Mesnilgrand was quite a bit louder and had quite a different aspect from that miserable little restaurant room in which a few Chinese mandarins of literature recently held a demonstration against God at five francs a head! These were revels of quite a different kind, and as they are not likely to be repeated, at least under the same conditions, we should remember them for the sake of the history of morals.

All those who took part in these sacrilegious revels are dead now, but at that time they were in the plenitude of life, which is at its highest when misfortune has amplified it. The friends of Mesnilgrand, the guests at his father's house, still enjoyed all the active strength they had ever possessed, and they had all the more because they had exercised it and drunk to excess all vices and pleasures. Circumstances and events had torn the breast from their mouth before they had time to suckle it, and left them only the more thirsty. For them, as for Mesnilgrand, it was "the hour of fury." They had not the high soul of Mesnil, that Orlando Furioso, whose Ariosto, if he had an Ariosto, would have resembled the tragic genius of Shakespeare. But on their own spiritual level and according to their own passions and intelligence, they had, like him, finished their lives before their death — which is not always the end of life and often comes long before the end. They were disarmed, yet still had the strength to carry arms. They were not merely officers revoked from the army of the Loire; they had also been revoked from life and hope. The empire was lost and the Revolution crushed by a reaction that could not keep under its foot, as Saint Michael keeps the dragon, all these men who had been turned out of their positions, their employment, and deprived of their ambition and all the benefits of their past life, and had drifted, powerless, defeated, and humiliated, to their native towns, there "to die miserably like dogs," as they bitterly said. In the Middle Ages they would have become shepherds, rovers, or soldiers of fortune, but you cannot choose the age you will live in, and their feet were entangled in the grooves of an imperious and ordered civilization, and they were obliged to remain quiet, champ the bit, and eat and drink their own blood, and swallow their disgust!

They could always have fought duels, of course, but what are a few saber cuts or pistol shots to men who need deluges of blood, enough to drown the earth, to calm the apoplexy of their fury and resentment? You may guess then what kind of prayers they were likely to offer up to



God when they spoke of Him, for if they did not believe in Him, there were others — their enemies — who did believe, and that was enough to make these atheists curse, blaspheme, and abuse whatever men hold holy or sacred. Mesnilgrand said of them one night, as he regarded them by the lurid flicker of a huge bowl of punch, when they were seated around his father's table, that "they would make a good crew for a pirate ship."

"Nothing would be wanting," he added, glancing at two or three defrocked priests, who were among the soldiers without uniform, "not even the chaplains — if pirates had a fancy for chaplains."

But after the Continental blockade had been raised, and in the foolish epoch of peace that followed, pirates were plentiful enough — it was the ship owner who was missing.

Well! These Friday guests, who every week scandalized the town of ——— came as usual to dine at Mesnilgrand's house the Friday following the Sunday on which Mesnil had been so brusquely accosted in the church by one of his old comrades, who was astonished and angry to find him there.

This old comrade was Captain Rançonnet, of the 8th Dragoons, and he had, by the way, been one of the first arrivals that day, not having seen Mesnilgrand again all the week and not being able to get over the visit to the church and the way in which Mesnil had rebuffed him when he sought an explanation. He intended to relate the astounding incident of which he had been a witness, for the amusement of the other guests, and have the matter cleared up. Captain Rançonnet was not one of the worst of a bad lot, but he was a braggart, and stupid in his impiety. Although he was not a fool, he was dull witted. The idea of a God annoyed him like a fly up his nose. He was, from head to foot, an officer of that time, with all the faults and all the good qualities of the time; fashioned by war and for war, believing in nothing but war, loving nothing but war; one of those dragoons who love to hear the jingle of their own spurs, as the old regimental song says.

Of the twenty-five who were to dine with the Mesnilgrands that day, he was, perhaps, the one who loved Mesnil the best, though he had lost the clue to the character of *his* Mesnil since he had seen him enter a church.

Is there any need to mention that the majority of the twenty-five guests were officers? But they were not all officers. There were doctors — the most materialistic and free-thinking doctors in the town; some old monks — contemporaries of old Mesnilgrand — who had broken their vows and escaped from their monastery; two or three ex-priests



who said they were married, but were in reality living in concubinage; and most conspicuous of all, a former representative of the people, who had voted for the king's death.

Redcaps or shakos — some of them thorough Revolutionists, others confirmed Bonapartists — they were ready to squabble and tear out each other's entrails, but they were all atheists, and on the subject of denial of the existence of God and contempt for all the churches, the most touching unanimity reigned among them.

Over this assembly of devils with all sorts of horns, presided the big devil in a cotton nightcap, old Mesnilgrand, the curious headdress having nothing comic about it with such a wan and terrible face underneath it.

He sat upright at the head of the table, like the mitred bishop of this sabbath, and opposite was his son Mesnil, with a weary face like a lion at rest, but with the muscles around his wrinkled jaw ever ready to play.

He stood out above all the others — imperially. The other officers were old *beaux* of the empire, when there were so many *beaux*, and they were certainly handsome and elegant, but their beauty was tempered, purely — or impurely — physical, and their elegance soldierly. Although dressed as ordinary citizens, they retained the stiffness of the uniform they had worn all their lives. To use one of their own expressions, they were rather too trussed up. The other guests — men of science, like the doctors, or turncoats, like the old monks who were concerned about their clothes, though they had worn and then trampled underfoot the sacred ornaments of priestly splendor — all looked shabbily dressed. But Mesnilgrand was dressed, as women would say, adorably. As it was still the morning, he was wearing a wonderful black frock coat and had tied around his neck (as one did then) a white scarf with shades of cream, spangled with almost imperceptible gold stars embroidered by hand. As he was at home, he had not put on boots. His feet, so small and well-shaped that the beggars at the street corner called him "Prince" when they caught sight of them, were encased in openwork silk socks and high-heeled pumps, like those favored by Chateaubriand, who thought more of his feet than any man in Europe except the Grand Duke Constantine. His coat, which was cut by Staub, was worn open, showing off his sloe-colored trousers and a plain black cashmere waistcoat without a watch chain, for that day he wore no jewelry of any sort, except an antique cameo of great price, representing the head of Alexander, on his cravat. Simply by looking at him in this confident attire, one felt that the artist had transformed the soldier in him and that he was



not of the same breed as the others, although he talked so familiarly with them. Patrician by nature, he contrasted sharply with these soldiers, who were brave and healthy, but vulgar.

Unless some discussion called forth his stormy eloquence, he spoke little at these noisy meetings; they were too loud for him. From the time the oysters appeared, there was such a babel of sounds and ideas that it seemed as if one note more and the ceiling — the cork of the room — would pop off, as so many other corks had done.

It was at noon precisely that they sat down to table, according to the ironical custom of these irreverent mockers, who took advantage of the least thing to show their contempt for the Church. There is a belief in that pious Western country that the pope sits down to table at midday, but that before doing so he blesses all the Christian world. Well, this august benediction appeared comic to these freethinkers; therefore old M. de Mesnilgrand never failed to say in a jeering way in his resonant voice, when the first stroke of twelve sounded from the church clock — and with that Voltairian smile that sometimes seemed to split in two his motionless moonlike face:

“Sit down, gentlemen! Christians like us ought not to deprive ourselves of the pope’s blessing!”

And this remark, or one equivalent to it, would become a spring-board for all the impieties that leap up in the course of the frenzied conversations at a dinner party of men, especially of such men as they were. As a general rule it may be said that all dinners composed exclusively of men, and not presided over by the harmonizing grace of the mistress of the house, where there is not the peaceful influence of woman to throw her grace, like a caduceus, between the gross vanities, the loud pretensions, the stupid, angry passions, and the clash of personalities that arises at a table of men, even witty ones, seem inclined to end like the feast of the Lapithae and the centaurs — at which there were no women either. At all repasts devoid of women’s society, even the most refined and best-bred men lose the charm of their politeness and natural distinction, and it is not astonishing that they do so. They have not a gallery to play to, and they immediately adopt a tone of licence that becomes vulgar at the least confrontation. Egoism — that unbanishable egoism which it is the art of society to conceal under polite forms — causes elbows to be put on the table, then stuck into your ribs. And if it is thus with the most refined men, what was it likely to be with the guests of the Mesnilgrands — fire-eaters and warriors, most at home in Jacobin clubs or around camp fires, who always fancied themselves at the bivouac or the club, or even in worse places?



It would be difficult to imagine, unless you had heard them, the shards of conversation of these men, all great eaters and drinkers, stuffed with victuals and heady wines, and who, before they came to the third course, had given loose rein to their tongues and metaphorically "put their feet in the trough." Their conversation was not all impiety, but it blossomed in the conversation, and these impious flowers filled vases! Remember that at this time Paul Louis Courier — who might well have figured at those dinners — wrote this phrase to stir up the blood of France: "The question is, shall we become monks or lackeys?" But that was not all. After politics, hatred of the Bourbons, the dark specter of Religion, regrets for the past by these broken-down officers, and all the other conversational avalanches that rolled from one end of this steaming table to the other, there were other noisy and tempestuous subjects for talk. For example, there was woman. Woman is the eternal subject of conversation of men between themselves, especially in France, the most conceited country on earth. They talked about women in general and women in particular; of women all over the world, as well as next door; the women of various countries these soldiers had visited, victoriously flaunting their uniforms; and those of the town, whom they perhaps did not visit, but whom they insolently called by their Christian and surnames as though they knew them intimately and about whom they spoke without any reserve, stripping off their reputations as they skinned a peach at dessert.

All took part in this abuse of women, even the oldest, the toughest, and those most disgusted with females, as they cynically called women — for a man may give up sexual love but never self-love, and though on the edge of the grave, men are always ready to root with their snouts in the garbage of conceit.

And on this occasion they had rooted up to their ears, for this dinner, which had unleashed tongues, was the spiciest that old M. de Mesnilgrand had ever given. In the dining room, now silent, but the walls of which could have told strange tales if they could have spoken, the time had come which comes at all dinners of men only, when the boasting begins — at first decent, then soon indecent, then unbuttoned, then shirtless and without shame — and everyone related some anecdote or other.

It was like a confession of demons! All these insolent railers — who would have scoffed at a poor monk confessing aloud his sins at the feet of his abbot, in the presence of all the brothers of the order — were doing exactly the same thing; not to humiliate themselves as the monk does, but to boast and brag of their abominable life, and all, more or



less, spat out their soul against God, and their spittle fell back in their own faces!

But in the midst of this flood of boasts of all sorts, there was one that seemed more . . . *piquant*, shall I say? No, *piquant* is not a strong enough word, but spicier, more peppery, more suited to the fiery palates of these frenzied fools, who, in the way of stories, would have swallowed even vitriol. Yet the man who related it was, of all these devils, the coolest. He was like Satan's backside: for Satan's backside, in spite of the hell that warms it, is quite cold — so say the witches who kiss it in the Black Mass at their sabbat.

This was a certain ex-abbot, appropriately named "the Renouncer" (for his name was indeed Abbé Reniant), who, in this society on the wrong side of the Revolution, prepared to undo all that was done, had appointed himself of his own accord, to be a priest without faith and a doctor without science, and who clandestinely carried on practices that were suspicious, and — who knows? — his business, but he had persuaded the lower classes in the town and the neighborhood that he knew more than all the doctors with all their degrees and diplomas. It was whispered mysteriously that he had secrets for curing people. *Secrets*, a fine word, which means everything because it means nothing; the battle horse of the quacks, the sole survivors of the sorcerers, who formerly exercised so great an influence on popular imagination.

This ex-Abbé Reniant — for as he said angrily, that confounded title of abbé was like ringworm on his name, and no tar would ever remove it! — did not employ these secret remedies (which were possibly poisons) for the sake of gain: he had enough to live on. But he obeyed the dangerous demon of experiment, which begins by treating human life as a subject for its essays and ends by making Sainte-Croix and Brinvilliers!

Not wanting to have anything to do with licensed doctors, as he scornfully called them, he made up his own medicines and sold or gave his mixtures — for he very often gave them away — on the sole condition that the bottles should be returned. The rascal was no fool, and he knew how to appeal to his patients. He gave herbs, of I know not what kinds, infused in white wine, in cases of dropsy brought on by overdrinking, and to girls who were "in trouble" — as the peasants said with a wink — and these drinks removed their trouble.

He was a man of average height, with a cold quiet look, and was dressed in the same style as old M. de Mesnilgrand (but in blue). His face, which was the color of unbleached linen, was surmounted by odious white blond hair, perfectly straight and evenly cut around his



head — the only priestly trait that remained. He spoke but little, and what he did say was brief and to the point. Cold and clean as the trammel of a Dutch chimney, he sat at the corner of the table at these dinners and sipped his wine affectedly while the others gulped theirs. He was not much liked by these hot-blooded fellows, who compared him to the sour wine of Saint Nitouche the hypocrite, a vineyard of their own creation. But this air only added more flavor to his story, when he said modestly that for his part the best thing he had ever done against what M. de Voltaire called "the Infamy," was that once — hang it, you do what you can! — he had given a packet of communion wafers to the pigs.

At these words there was a roar of triumphant interjections, but above them all rose the shrill, sarcastic voice of old M. de Mesnilgrand.

"That was, no doubt, Abbé," he said, "the last time that you gave communion!" And the wry old man put a dry, white hand above his eyes in order to look at Reniant, who was half hidden behind his glass and squeezed between the two stalwart figures of his neighbors, Captain Rançonnet, as ruddy and fiery as a torch, and Captain Travers de Mautravers of the 6th Cuirassiers, who was as wide as he was tall.

"It was long after that," replied the former priest, "and after I had thrown my frock to the nettles. It was at the height of the Revolution; at the time when you had come down here, Citizen Le Carpentier, as representative of the people. Do you remember a young girl of Hémèves whom you caused to be put in prison? — a mad woman! — an epileptic!"

"Ah!" said Mautravers, "so there was a woman mixed up in the affair! Did you give her to the pigs as well?"

"You think yourself funny, Mautravers!" said Rançonnet. "Don't interrupt the abbé. Finish your story, Abbé!"

"Oh, the story," replied Reniant, "is soon told. I was asking Monsieur Le Carpentier if he remembered that girl. She was named Tesson — Josephine Tesson, if I remember rightly — a plump young woman, fiercely devoted to the Chouans and the priests, who had kindled a fire in her blood, fanaticized her, and driven her mad. She spent her life hiding priests. When there was one to be saved, she would have braved thirty guillotines. Ah, she hid the ministers of the Lord, as she called them, in her house, and everywhere else. She would have hidden them under her bed, in her bed, or under her petticoats; and if they could have stayed there, she would have stuffed them — devil take me if she would not! — where she put their boxes of hosts — between her breasts!"

"A thousand cannonballs!" said Rançonnet, excitedly.

"No, not a thousand, but only two, Monsieur Rançonnet," said the



rakish old apostate, laughing at his own joke, "but they were good-sized ones!"

The joke took, and there was a general laugh.

"A strange ciborium, a woman's breast!" said Doctor Bleny, dreamily.

"Oh, the ciborium of necessity," replied Reniant, who had regained his composure. "All the priests whom she concealed, and who were prosecuted, pursued, tracked down, and without a church, or sanctuary, or hiding-place, had given her their holy sacraments to guard, and she had hidden them all in her breast, believing that they would never be looked for there. Oh, they had thorough faith in her. They called her a saint. They made her believe that she was one. They unsettled her mind and made her long to be a martyr. She was brave and ardent and boldly went everywhere with her box of sacramental wafers under her bib. She carried them at night, in all weathers, through rain, wind, snow, or fog, over abominable roads, to the priests in hiding who were giving communion to the dying on the sly. One night we happened upon them at a farm where a Chouan was dying—I and a few good lads of Rossignol's Infernal Column. One of our fellows, tempted by those splendid outposts of warm flesh, tried to take liberties with her, but she was a tough customer, and she printed her ten nails on his face so deeply that he must have been marked for the rest of his life. But, bleeding as he was, the rascal would not let go, and he pulled out the box of wafers hidden in her breast. I counted a full dozen hosts, which, in spite of her cries and struggles, for she rushed on us like a fury, I managed to throw at once into the pig trough."

He stopped, giving himself as many airs as a louse on top of a boil.

"You well avenged the pigs of the Gospel into whom Christ made the devils enter," said old M. de Mesnilgrand, in his sarcastic voice. "You put the good Lord into them instead of the Devil—it was tit for tat."

"Did they have indigestion, Monsieur Reniant—or was it the people who ate them?" asked seriously a hideous, little old man named Le Hay, who lent money at fifty percent and who used to say that "in all things one must consider the ends."

There was a pause in the flood of blasphemy.

"But you say nothing, Mesnil, about Abbé Reniant's story," remarked Captain Rançonnet, who was watching for an occasion to bring in his account of Mesnilgrand's visit to the church.

In fact, Mesnil had said nothing. He was sitting with his elbow on the table and his cheek on his hand, listening without any great taste for all these abominations uttered by hardened sinners, and to which he had long been accustomed. He had heard so many in the course of



his career. A man's surroundings are almost his destiny. In the Middle Ages, the Chevalier de Mesnilgrand would have been a Crusader, burning with faith. In the nineteenth century, he was a soldier of Bonaparte; his unbelieving father had never spoken to him about God, and he had lived, particularly in Spain, in the ranks of an army to which everything was permitted and who had committed as many sacrileges as the soldiers of the Constable of Bourbon did at the taking of Rome. Fortunately, surroundings are not absolutely fatal, except to vulgar souls and minds. With really strong characters there is something, though it be but an atom, that escapes or resists the milieu. This atom remained invincible in Mesnilgrand.

He would have said nothing that day and allowed to pass in stony indifference the torrent of blasphemous filth that surged around him, boiling like the pitch of hell, but when he was addressed by Rançonnet, he replied with a weariness that was almost melancholy:

"What do you want me to say? Monsieur Reniant did not do anything to boast of that you should admire him so much. If he believed that it was really God, the living God, the God of vengeance, whom he had thrown to the pigs, at the risk of being struck by lightning on the spot, on the certainty of hell hereafter, there would at least have been some courage in it, some scorn of that which is worse than death, since God, if He exists, can torture for eternity.

"That would have been courageous — foolish, no doubt, but still courageous enough to tempt a man like you to imitate it. But it had not that merit, my dear fellow. Monsieur Reniant did not believe that those hosts were God. He had not the least doubt on the subject. To him they were nothing but breadstuff, only made holy by foolish superstition, and for him, or for yourself, my poor Rançonnet, to empty a box of sacramental wafers into the pig trough was no more heroic than it would have been to empty a snuffbox or a sack of biscuits there."

"Eh! Eh!" said old M. de Mesnilgrand, leaning back in his chair, looking at his son from under his hand, as he would have looked at a target to see where the shot had told. He was always interested in what his son said, even when he did not share his opinions, and in this case he did. So he repeated his "Eh! Eh!"

"In fact, it was nothing, my poor Rançonnet," continued Mesnil, "just merely — I must use the word — swinish. But what I do admire, and admire exceedingly, gentlemen — though I do not believe in much myself — is this girl, Tesson, as you call her, Monsieur Reniant, who carried in her bosom what she believed to be her God, who of her two virgin breasts made a tabernacle in all purity for this God, and who



breathed, and lived, and passed tranquilly through all the dangers of life, with this brave breast bearing the burden of a God — tabernacle and altar at the same time — and an altar on which at any minute its own blood might have been poured forth. You, Rançonnet, you, Mautravers, you, Sélune, and myself also; we have all carried the emperor on our breast, for we had his Legion of Honor, and it gave us more courage in battle to have it there. But it was not the *image* of her God that she carried on her breast; for her it was the reality. It was a substantial God who could be touched and eaten, and whom she carried at the risk of her life, to those who hungered for that God. Well, on my word of honor, I find that quite simply sublime. I esteem that woman as did the priests who gave her their God to carry.

"I would like to know what became of her. Perhaps she is dead; perhaps she still lives miserably in some corner of the country — but I know that if I were a marshal of France and I met her seeking her bread, her naked feet trudging through the mire, I would dismount from my horse and respectfully take off my hat to that noble woman, as though she still really carried God in her breast. Henri IV, when he knelt in the mud before the holy sacrament that was being carried to some poor person, did not feel more respect than I should in kneeling before that woman."

His cheek was no longer leaning on his hand. He had thrown his head back; and when he spoke of kneeling, he seemed to expand to the ceiling, like the bride of Corinth in Goethe's poem, without having risen from his chair.

"The world is coming to an end!" growled Mautravers, breaking a peach pit with his closed fist, as though it had been a hammer. "Here is a captain of hussars talking about going down on his knees to a devotee."

"It is as if," said Rançonnet, "the infantry passed the cavalry at full gallop to the enemy! After all, they did not make bad mistresses, those chanters of the *Oremus* and eaters of the body of Christ, who think themselves damned for every pleasure they bestow upon us and which we make them share with us. But, Captain Mautravers, there are worse things for a soldier to do than wrong a few pious females; and one of them is to become a devotee himself, like a drowned chicken of a civilian. No longer ago than last Sunday, at nightfall, where do you suppose, gentlemen, that I caught Commandant Mesnilgrand, now present?"

No one replied; and from all parts of the table, eyes were fixed on Captain Rançonnet.

"By my saber!" said Rançonnet, "I met him — no, not met him, for I have too much respect for my boots to trail them in the muck of their



chapels — but I saw him from behind slipping into the church and stooping under the little, low door at the corner. Astonished, astounded. *Sacrebleu!* I said to myself, do my eyes deceive me? But that is surely Mesnilgrand's figure. What can Mesnilgrand be going to do in a church? The recollection came into my head of our old love affairs with those cursed Beguines in Spain. What, I said, hasn't he finished yet? Is he still under the influence of some petticoat? May the Devil scratch out my eyes with his claws if I don't see what this one is like! And I entered their Mass shop. Unfortunately, it was as dark in there as the jaws of hell. I walked around and stumbled over the old women on their knees, muttering their paternosters. It was impossible to see, but in groping about in that infernal mixture of darkness and the carcasses of old women praying, I caught hold of Mesnil, who was gliding along one of the side aisles. But, would you believe it? He refused to tell me what he was doing in that confounded church. That is why I denounce him now, gentlemen, that you may oblige him to explain himself."

"Go on! Speak, Mesnil! Justify yourself! Reply to Rançonnet!" they cried from all parts of the room.

"Justify myself!" said Mesnil gaily. "I have no need to justify myself for doing what I please. You, who grumble so much about the Inquisition, are you not at present an inquisition in another sense? I went into the church Sunday night, because I chose to do so."

"And why did you choose?" asked Mautravers, for if the devil is a logician, a captain of cuirassiers may well be one also.

"Ah, there!" said Mesnilgrand, laughing. "I went there — who knows? — perhaps to confess. In any event, the door of a confessional was opened for me. But you cannot say, Rançonnet, that my confession lasted very long!"

They could all see that he was making fun of them, but there was an air of mystery about the fun which annoyed them.

"Your confession! A thousand hells! Have you taken the plunge?" said Rançonnet sadly, for he took the matter seriously. Then, throwing himself back like a rearing horse, he cried: "No, by heavens, it is impossible! Look here, you fellows. Can you believe that Captain Mesnilgrand has confessed like some old granny, kneeling on a stool, with his nose against the grating of a priest's box? I cannot get the idea of such a spectacle into my head! Thirty thousand bullets instead!"

"You are very good, I thank you," said Mesnilgrand, with comic mildness — the mildness of a lamb.

"Let us talk seriously," said Mautravers. "I am like Rançonnet. I could never believe in a man of your sort doing monkish tricks. Even



on their death beds, men like you don't jump like a frightened frog into a basin of holy water."

"I do not know what you would do on your death bed, gentlemen," replied Mesnilgrand slowly, "but as for me, before leaving for the other world, I would like, at all events, to pack up my portmanteau." And this was delivered so gravely that there was a silence, like that of a pistol which had just fired but now had a broken trigger.

"But let us leave that for now," continued Mesnilgrand. "You are, it seems, more stupefied by war and the life we lead than I am. I have nothing to say about your unbelief; but as you, Rançonnet, particularly want to know why your comrade Mesnilgrand, whom you believe to be as much an atheist as yourself, entered a church, I would like to tell you. There is a story attached to it. When you have heard it, you will understand perhaps, even without believing in a God, why I entered that church."

He made a pause, as though to give more solemnity to what he was about to relate, and then began.

"You were speaking about Spain, Rançonnet. It was precisely in Spain that my story took place. Many of you took part in that fateful war of 1808 which began the downfall of the Empire and our misfortunes. Those who were in that war will not have forgotten it — you less than anyone, Commandant Sélune. You have a forcible reminder on your face."

Commandant Sélune was seated near old M. de Mesnilgrand, opposite to Mesnil. He was a man of military appearance and had more right to the nickname of "The Slashed" than the Duke of Guise, for in a skirmish of outposts in Spain he had received, a terrible saber cut, which had split his face, nose and all, from the left temple to below the right ear. Under any circumstances this would have been a very severe wound, though one which would have a noble appearance on a soldier's face, but the surgeon who brought together the edges of this gaping wound had been either clumsy or in a hurry and had joined them badly. The army was on the march, and in order to get the job over, he had cut away part of the flesh with scissors, so that it was not a seam that crossed Sélune's face, but a regular ravine. It was horrible, but after all it was grand. He was violent, and when the blood rose to his face, the scar became red and resembled a broad red ribbon across his bronzed face. "You wear," Mesnil had said to him one day, "your Cross of Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor on your face instead of on your chest — but rest assured, it will come down."

It never did come down — the empire ended first — and Sélune remained a chevalier only.



"Well, gentlemen," continued Mesnilgrand, "we saw some atrocious things in Spain, and even did some ourselves, but I do not remember having seen anything more abominable than that which I am about to have the honor to relate."

"For my part," said Sélune nonchalantly, with the air of an old stager who does not mean to be surprised at anything, "for my part I have seen eighty nuns thrown one on the other, half dead, into a well, after each one had first been violated by two squadrons."

"Mere brutality of soldiers," said Mesnilgrand coolly, "but this was the refined cruelty of an officer."

He sipped his wine and then glanced around the table.

"Did any of you know Major Ydow?" he asked.

Rançonnet was the only one who replied.

"I did," he said. "Of course I knew Major Ydow. *Parbleu!* He was with me in the 8th Dragoons."

"Then, since you knew him," replied Mesnilgrand, "you must have known someone else. When he joined the 8th Dragoons, he had a woman with him."

"La Rosalba, called 'la Pudica,'" said Rançonnet, "his well-known ———," and he said the word coarsely.

"Yes," replied Mesnilgrand pensively. "Such a woman does not deserve the name of a mistress, even of a man like Ydow. The major had brought her from Italy, where, before he came to Spain, he had served in a reserve corps, with the rank of captain. As you are the only person here, Rançonnet, who knew Major Ydow, you will permit me to introduce to these gentlemen this foreign devil, whose coming made such a stir when he first arrived among the 8th Dragoons with this woman on a chain."

"He was not a Frenchman, it would seem, which was certainly no great loss to France. He was born I don't know where, and of I don't know whom, in Illyria, or Bohemia—I am not sure which. But, wherever he was born, he was strange, and that made him seem a stranger everywhere. He seemed to be the product of a mixture of several races. He said himself that his name ought to be pronounced in the Greek way because he was of Greek origin, and you could believe that from his beauty, for he was handsome—perhaps too handsome for a soldier. A man who has such good looks might not be willing to have his face ruined, considering it a masterpiece. Masterpiece as he was, however, he went into battle with the others, but when you have said that of Major Ydow, you have said all. He did his duty, but he never did more than his duty. He did not have what the emperor called the 'sacred fire.'



In spite of his beauty, which I willingly grant him, I saw his ugly side beneath his superb features. I have visited museums — to which you fellows never go — and found there a resemblance to Major Ydow. He was strikingly like the busts of Antinous, especially that one in which the sculptor, by fancy or bad taste, has inserted two emeralds for the eyeballs. But instead of white marble the major's sea-green eyes lighted up an olive face that had faultless angles, but it was not Endymion who slumbered so voluptuously behind those melancholic evening stars that were his eyes, but a tiger, which I one day saw awake!

"Major Ydow was both dark and fair. The curly hair around his narrow forehead was very dark, whilst his long and silky mustache was fawn-colored, almost blond. It is said that that is a sign of treason, or perfidy, when the beard or mustache is a different color than the hair. Was he a traitor? The major might have become so later. He would, perhaps, like many others, have betrayed the emperor, but he would not have the time. When he joined the 8th Dragoons, he was probably only false, and not false enough to avoid having the look of it. Was it this air that first caused his unpopularity among his comrades? At any rate, it is certain that he was very soon loathed by all the regiment. Very vain of his beauty — though for my own part I would have preferred many uglier men I knew — he seemed, as the soldiers said, to be fit for nothing but to be a mirror for a . . . what you called Rosalba just now, Rançonnet.

"Major Ydow was thirty-five. You can well understand that with the sort of beauty that pleases all women, even the proudest — that is their weakness — Major Ydow was terribly spoiled by them and learned all the vices one learns from women — but he had also some others they never taught him and which cannot be learned. We were certainly not monks in those days. We were all vicious enough — gamblers, libertines, seducers, duelists, drunkards, if need be, and spendthrifts in every way. We had no right therefore to be overly particular. Well, bad as we were, he was apparently worse than any of us. For us, there were certain things — not many, but there were one or two — of which, demons as we were, we would not have been capable. But he, it was said, was capable of anything. I was not in the 8th Dragoons, but I knew all the officers, and they spoke of him with much bitterness. They accused him of servility and toadying to his superiors. They suspected him of many things — of being a spy among others — and he even fought two duels, courageously enough, because of this half-expressed suspicion; but that did not change the general opinion. A cloud always hung over him which could not be dissipated.



"Moreover, he was not only both fair and dark, which is rare enough, but he was lucky at cards and lucky with women, which is not the rule either. But that double good fortune cost him dear, for his success in both fields and the jealousy inspired by his good looks — for though men pretend to be above, or indifferent to, considerations of ugliness and repeat the consoling expression they have invented, that 'a man is quite handsome enough when he doesn't frighten his horse,' they are among themselves quite as jealous and petty-minded as women are — no doubt, these advantages explained the antipathy that was felt toward him, an antipathy that affected the form of contempt, for contempt is a deeper insult than hate, and hate knows that well.

"Many times have I heard it half whispered that he was a 'dangerous rascal,' although it would have been difficult to prove that he was one. And, in fact, gentlemen, even at this moment I am uncertain whether Major Ydow was what he was said to be. But, by God!" continued Mesnilgrand energetically, with a strange horror in his voice, "what they did *not* say of him, and what he was one day, I know, and that is enough for me!"

"It would be enough for us too, probably," said Rançonnet gaily, "but what the devil connection is there between you entering a church, as I saw you enter it last Sunday night, and this damned major of the 8th Dragoons, who would have pillaged all the churches and cathedrals of Spain and the Christian world to make jewelry for his concubine from the gold and precious stones of the sacramental vessels?"

"Keep in the ranks, Rançonnet," said Mesnilgrand, as though he had been commanding his squadron, "and hold your tongue. Are you always going to be as hot-headed and impatient as you were before the enemy? Let me maneuver my story as I like."

"Well, then, march!" replied the fiery captain, as he tossed off a glass of Picardy wine to keep himself cool.

And Mesnilgrand continued.

"It is very probable that if it had not been for the woman he had with him and whom he called his wife, although she was only his mistress and did not bear his name, Major Ydow would scarcely have mixed with the officers of the 8th Dragoons. But this woman, who was all that people called her, or she would never have taken up with such a man, prevented an even greater desert from forming around him than would have without her. I have often seen *that* occur in regiments. A man falls under suspicion or into discredit, and the others hold no communication with him beyond what is required by the interests of the service, and he has no chums; no one shakes hands with him, and even



at the café — in the hot and familiar atmosphere in which all coolness dissolves — his comrades keep aloof from him with a polite reserve until he goes, when the constraint vanishes. Most probably that is what would have happened to the major, but a woman is the Devil's loadstone. Those who did not like him for his own sake, liked him for hers. Those who would never have offered the major a glass of schnapps had he been without his 'wife,' offered it when they thought of her, thinking it might prove the means of getting an invitation, and thus meeting her.

"There is a law of moral arithmetic written in every man's breast long before a philosopher put it on paper, and that is, 'that it is farther from a woman to her first lover than the first is from the tenth,' and I believe that axiom was truer of the major's wife than it was of anyone else. As she had bestowed herself upon him, she might bestow herself on another — and anybody might be that other! In a very short time it was known throughout the regiment that there was very little presumption in such an aspiration. All who have any skill in reading a woman and can detect the true odor through the white, scented veils of virtue in which they enfold themselves, knew directly that Rosalba was *the* most depraved of all depraved women, the perfection of vice.

"I am not calumniating her, am I, Rançonnet? Perhaps you have made love to her, and, if so, you know that there was never a more fascinating crystallization of every vice. Where did the major find her? Where did she come from? No one dared ask at first, but the hesitation did not last long. The conflagration she lighted up, not only in the 8th Dragoons but in my regiment, and also — as you may remember, Rançonnet — throughout all the General Staff of the expedition, soon assumed huge proportions. We had seen plenty of women, mistresses of officers, following the regiment; if an officer could afford the luxury of a woman among his other baggage, the colonels shut their eyes to the abuse, or even engaged in it themselves. But we had never seen a woman like Rosalba. We were accustomed to pretty girls, if you like, but they were all the same type: bold, determined, almost masculine, almost impudent; generally pretty brunettes of a more or less passionate temperament, who looked like boys and were very fascinating and voluptuous in the uniform that their lovers sometimes took the fancy to make them don.

"If the legitimate and honest wives of officers can be distinguished from other women by some subtle characteristic that is common to them all and that they derive from the military surroundings in which they live, the same may be said of the mistresses of officers. But Major Ydow's Rosalba had nothing in common with the adventuresses or camp followers to whom we had been accustomed. To begin with, she was a



tall, pale young girl — but she did not long remain pale, as you will hear — with a mass of blond hair. That was all. Nothing to make a great fuss about. Her skin was not whiter than that of other women who have fresh and healthy blood under their skin. Her blond hair was neither that sparkling blond that has the metallic sheen of gold, nor the muted, ash blond of ambergris, which I have seen in some Swedish women. She had a classical face — what you might call a cameo face — but its passive correctness did not differ from that of many others who are the delight and annoyance of passionate lovers. Whether you cared for her or not, she was certainly a pretty woman. But the love philters she gave men to drink had nothing to do with her beauty. They came from elsewhere. They were where you would never guess in this monster of shamelessness who dared to call herself Rosalba, who dared to bear the immaculate name of Rosalba, which should only be borne by innocence, and who, not satisfied with being Rosalba — the White Rose — called herself as well, over and above, ‘Pudica, the Modest.’”

“Virgil also called himself ‘the modest,’ and he wrote *Corydon ardebat Alexim*,” remarked Reniant, who had not forgotten his Latin.

“And it was not in irony,” continued Mesnilgrand. “The name of Rosalba was not invented by us, but we read it in her face when we first saw her, where Nature had written it with all the roses of her creation. La Rosalba was not merely astonishingly modest, she was Modesty itself. If she had been as pure as the virgins in heaven, who perhaps blush when the angels look at them, she would not have been more the incarnation of modesty. Who said — it must have been an Englishman — that the world was the work of a devil gone mad? It must surely have been that devil who, in a fit of insanity, had created Rosalba to give men pleasure; a devil who knew how to mingle voluptuousness with modesty, and modesty with voluptuousness, and spice them with a celestial condiment to make the most infernal stew of delights a woman can bestow on mortal man.

“Rosalba’s modesty was not merely in the expression of her face, though that would have upset all Lavater’s theories. No, with her, modesty was not only on the surface, it flowed in her blood. Nor was it assumed out of hypocrisy. Rosalba’s vices had never rendered that homage, or any other, to virtue. It was really a truth. La Rosalba was as modest as she was voluptuous, and strange to say she was both at once. When she said or did the most daring things, she had an adorable way of saying ‘I am ashamed!’ which I fancy I can still hear. And — an extraordinary phenomenon — you were always at the beginning with her, even after the dénouement. She would have left an orgy of bacchantes with the



air of a maiden who commits her first sin. Even in the woman overcome, swooning, half dead, there was the flustered virgin, still agitated and blushing. I could never make you understand the delightful effect of these contrasts on one's heart — language would fail to express that."

He stopped, and thought, and all the others remained lost in thought. It seemed as though his words had transformed into dreamers all these soldiers who had been under fire of every sort, these debauched monks and old doctors, and brought back to them visions of their old life. Even the impetuous Rançonnet did not speak. He was remembering.

"You must understand," continued Mesnilgrand, "that this phenomenon was not known at first. When she first came to the 8th Dragoons, we saw nothing but a very pretty girl, of the same kind as Princess Pauline Borghese, the emperor's sister, whom she greatly resembled. Princess Pauline had that ideally chaste look, and you know what she died of... But Pauline had not enough modesty to give a rosy tint to the smallest part of her charming body, while La Rosalba had enough to dye every part of hers scarlet. The naive remark of astonishment of Pauline Borghese when she was asked how she could pose nude before Canova — 'But the studio was warm! There was a stove!' — would never have been uttered by La Rosalba. If you had addressed the same question to her, she would have fled, hiding her face, divinely crimson, in hands divinely pink. But be sure that, as she fled, there would have lurked in one of the folds of her dress all the temptations of hell.

"Such was Rosalba, whose virginlike aspect deceived us all when she arrived in the regiment. Major Ydow might have presented her to us as his legitimate wife, or even his daughter, and we would have believed him. Although her limpid blue eyes were beautiful, they were never more beautiful than when they were cast down. The lids were more expressive than the gaze. To us men — who had spent our time in war or with women, and what women! — this strange creature caused a new sensation.

"It was vulgarly but forcibly said that 'one would have given her holy communion even if she had not said confession.' 'What a confoundedly pretty girl!' whispered the old rovers, 'but what an affected minx! How does she manage to make the major happy?' He knew, but he did not tell.

"He drank his happiness in silence, like those true drunkards who drink alone. He never told of the secret happiness that made him faithful and discreet for the first time in his life — him! the Lauzun of the garrison, the most pompous and conceited of men, who was called the drum major of seduction by the officers in Naples who had known him



there. His beauty, of which he was so proud, might have brought all the daughters of Spain to his feet, and he would not have bothered to pick up a single one.

"At that time we were on the frontier between Spain and Portugal, with the English in front of us, and we occupied the towns least hostile to King Joseph. Major Ydow and La Rosalba lived together as they would have in a garrison town in time of peace. You remember that relentless war in Spain, furious and slow, which was like no other war, for we did not fight solely for conquest but to plant a new dynasty and a new organization in a country that first had to be conquered. You all remember that between the fierce skirmishes there were long pauses, and that, in the intervals, in the part of the country we held, we gave fêtes, to which we invited all the most *afrancesadas* of the Spanish women. It was at these fêtes that Major Ydow's wife, who had already been much noticed, became celebrated. She shone amid the dark-haired girls of Spain like a diamond on a jet-black setting. It was then she first began to exercise on men all those fascinations that derived from her diabolical nature and made her the most depraved of courtesans, with the face of Raphael's most heavenly Madonna.

"The passions she aroused continued to burn and spread. In a short time everyone was under her thrall, even the generals who were old enough to be prudent — all were smitten with La Pudica, as they liked to call her. Everyone had pretensions to her. There were flirtations, and then duels, as was sure to be the case among high-spirited men who always had their sword in hand. She was the sultan of these terrible odalisques and threw her handkerchief to anyone who pleased her — and many pleased her.

"As for Major Ydow, he let her say and do what she liked. Was he too conceited to be jealous, or, knowing he was hated and despised, did he enjoy, in the pride of possession, the passions that the woman of whom he was the master inspired in his enemies? It was hardly possible that he failed to notice anything. I have sometimes seen his emerald eyes turn dark as coal when he saw some officer, who was suspected of being the lover of his better half at the moment — but he restrained himself. And as everybody always thought the worst possible about him, his calm indifference, or voluntary blindness, was imputed to motives of the most abject sort. It was thought that his wife was not so much a pedestal for his vanity as a ladder for his ambition.

"This was said — as things of that sort are said — but he never heard it. I, who had my reasons for observing him and who deemed that the hate and scorn that were heaped upon him were unjust, often asked myself



whether there was more weakness than strength, or more strength than weakness, in the somber impassiveness of this man, who was daily betrayed by his mistress and who never showed the bites of jealousy. By God, gentlemen, we have all known men so hypnotized by a woman as still to believe in her when everything accuses her, and who, instead of avenging themselves when the absolute certainty of treason penetrates their souls, prefer to hide in the happiness of cowardice and draw over their head the coverlet of ignominy!

"Was Major Ydow such a man? Perhaps. Certainly La Pudica was capable of having reduced him to that degrading condition of fanaticism. The mythological Circe, who changed men to beasts, was nothing compared to this Pudica, this Virgin-Messalina before, during, and after. With the passions that burned in her heart, and those she ignited in all the officers, who were not easily enamored, she was soon compromised, yet she never compromised herself.

"This distinction must be borne in mind. She never by her conduct gave anyone a hold over her. If she had a lover, it was a secret between her and her alcove. Major Ydow had not the slightest pretence of causing a scandal. Did she love him, perchance? She stayed with him, and she could surely, if she had wished, have latched on to another's fortunes. I knew a field marshal who so doted on her that he had his baton made into an umbrella handle for her. There are women who love — not their lover, though they love him as well. The carp miss their mud, said Madame de Maintenon. La Rosalba did not want to miss hers, so she never came out of it — and I fell into it.

"You all know the song that was sung last century:

*When Boufflers came to court,  
With love she made all burn,  
And each one had her in his turn.*

"And I had her in my turn. I have had women by the gross.

"But I never suspected there would be one like Rosalba. The mud was a paradise. I am not going to give you an analysis of my feelings, as a novelist would. I was a man of action, brutal in a sense, like Comte Almaviva, and I did not love her in the elevated and romantic sense of the word. Neither soul, intellect, nor vanity counted for anything in the kind of happiness she lavished on one, but the happiness had nothing of the lightness of a passing fancy. I had not supposed sensuality could be so profound. It was the most profound of sensualities. Ah! The body of that woman was her only soul. And with that body she



one evening gave me a pleasure that will enable you to judge of her better than anything I can say about her. Yes, one evening she had the boldness and indecency to receive me when her only costume was a thin, transparent Indian chiffon — a mist, a vapor, through which you saw her body, the shape of which was its only purity and which was flushed the deep vermilion of both voluptuousness and modesty. May the Devil take me if beneath this white mist she did not resemble a statue of living coral. Since that time, I do not care a bit about the whiteness of other women."

And Mesnilgrand flicked a bit of orange peel up to the ceiling over the head of Representative Le Carpentier, who had helped to fell the head of a king.

"Our liaison lasted some time," he continued, "but do not imagine that I wearied of her. I did not weary of her. Into sensation, which is finite, as the philosophers say in their abominable jargon, she imported the infinite. No, if I left her it was for reasons of moral disgust — of pride for myself and scorn for her — for in her wildest embraces I could not believe that she loved me.

"When I asked her: 'Do you love me?' — that question which is impossible not to ask, even with every proof given you that you are loved — she would reply 'No!' or shake her head enigmatically. She wallowed in modesty and shame, and remained beneath them amid the disorder of aroused senses, as impenetrable as the Sphinx. Only the Sphinx was cold, and she was not.

"Well, this impenetrability, which irritated and annoyed me, followed by the certainty that she indulged in as many caprices as Catherine II, formed the double cause why I tore myself from the omnipotent arms of this woman, this font of all desire! I left her — or rather I never went back to her. But I preserved my opinion that there could never be another woman like her, and that thought made me calm, and even indifferent with all other women. But she put the finishing touch on me, as an officer. After I left her, I thought of nothing but my military duties. She had dipped me in the Styx."

"And you became quite an Achilles," said old M. de Mesnilgrand, proudly.

"I do not know what I became," continued Mesnilgrand, "but I know that after our separation, Major Ydow — who was on the same terms with me that he was with the other officers of the division — told us one day at the café that his wife was pregnant and that he soon expected the happiness of being a father. At this unexpected news, some looked at one another, others smiled, but he noticed nothing or,



if he did, paid no attention, probably being resolved to resent nothing but a direct insult. When he had left, a friend whispered in my ear 'Is the child yours, Mesnil?' and in my conscience a secret voice, better informed than his, put the same question to me. I did not dare to reply. La Rosalba, even in our most confidential interviews, had never said a word to me about this child, which might be mine, or the major's, or someone else's."

"The child of the regiment," broke in Mautravers, as though delivering this point with his cavalry saber.

"Never," Mesnilgrand went on, "had she made the least allusion to her pregnancy — but what was there astonishing in that? La Pudica was, as I have said, a sphinx, who devoured pleasure silently and kept her secret. No emotion ever filtered through the membranes of her body, which was only open to pleasure, and in whom modesty, no doubt, was the first fear, the first trembling, the first faint spark of pleasure. To learn that she was pregnant had a curious effect on me. We must agree, gentlemen, now that we are past the bestial period of passion, that what is terrible about these partnerships in paternity — this shared platter — is not only the unsavoriness of it, but the loss of all paternal feeling; it is this terrible anxiety that prevents you from hearing the voice of nature and chokes it in a doubt from which there is no escape. You say to yourself, 'Is this child mine?'

"Uncertainty pursues you, as a punishment for your share in the transaction — the shameful partnership to which you have submitted! If you had a heart and you thought for long on this question, you would go mad; but life, with its power and frivolity, carries you away on its flood, like the cork float of a broken line.

"After Major Ydow's announcement, the paternal instinct I thought I had felt quivering in my gut died away. It is true that a few days later I had something else to think of than La Pudica's baby. We fought at Talavera, and Major Titan of the 9th Hussars was killed in the first charge; so I was obliged to take command of the squadron.

"The battle of Talavera only embittered the war. We were more often on the march, more harassed by the enemy, and naturally there was less talk about La Pudica among us. She followed the regiment in a wagon, and it was there, it was said, that she gave birth to a child, which Major Ydow, who believed himself to be the father, loved as though it had really been his. At least, when the child died, for it died some months after its birth, the major felt deep grief, a grief bordering on madness, and it was not laughed about in the regiment. For the first time, the antipathy of which he was the object was stilled. He was pitied much



more than the mother, who, if she wept for her offspring, still continued to be the Rosalba we all knew, that harlot of the Devil's own make, who had, in spite of her vices, preserved the phenomenal faculty of being able to blush to her backbone two hundred times a day. Her beauty did not diminish. It resisted all damage. And yet, had the life she was leading lasted, it would have made her 'as worn out as an old saddle cloth,' as they say in the cavalry."

"Then it didn't last? Do you know what became of that bitch of a woman?" asked Rançonnet, breathless with excitement, and forgetting for a minute the visit to the church he was so anxious to have explained.

"Yes," said Mesnilgrand, concentrating his voice as though he had reached the climax of his story. "You believed, as everybody else did, that she sunk with Ydow in the storm of war, in the whirlwind of those events in which so many of us were scattered and disappeared. But today I will reveal to you Rosalba's fate."

Captain Rançonnet put his elbows on the table and listened, clenching his glass in his big hand as though it were the hilt of his saber.

"The war did not cease," continued Mesnilgrand. "The patient fury of the Spaniards, who took five hundred years to drive out the Moors, would have taken as long to drive us out. We could not advance through the country without examining every step we took. Every village we took we fortified and turned into a weapon against the enemy. The little town of Alcudia, which we had taken, was our garrison for some time. A large convent there was transformed into a barrack, but the staff was lodged in private houses in the town, and Major Ydow had that of the *alcalde*. As this was the largest house in the town, Major Ydow often received the officers there, for we kept to ourselves now. We had broken off all relations with the *afrancesados*, mistrusting them, as the hatred of the French was on the increase. At these meetings, which were sometimes interrupted by the enemy firing at our outposts, La Rosalba did the honors serving us punch, with that incomparably chaste air that always seemed to me a joke of the Devil.

"She chose her victims, but I never troubled about my successors. I had torn myself away from her, and I did not drag behind me what someone or other has called the broken chain of lost hopes. I felt neither spite, nor jealousy, nor resentment. I was interested, but as a spectator only, in the doings of this woman, who concealed the most impudent excesses of vice under the most charming affectation of innocence.

"I used to go to her house, and before other people she spoke to me with the almost timid simplicity of a young girl you meet by accident at a well or in a wood. She no longer intoxicated me, made me dizzy,



nor set my senses on fire — all those terrible symptoms had passed. I considered them dissipated, vanished, impossible! But I could not, when I saw that scarlet flush suffuse her face for a word or a look, help feeling like a man who sees, in his emptied glass, the last drop of the rosé champagne he has been drinking, and who is tempted to form a bead on his thumbnail of the last forgotten drop.

"I told her this one evening, when I was alone with her. I had left the café early, while all the officers were playing cards or billiards, and gambling. It was evening, but an evening in Spain when the torrid sun could not tear itself from the sky. I found her barely dressed, with her shoulders and arms bare in the African heat — those beautiful arms I had so often bitten and which, at certain moments of emotion that I had so often caused, assumed what artists call the 'tone' of a strawberry's flesh. Her hair, weighted by the heat, fell thickly over her delicately tinted neck, and this disheveled, negligent, languorous air made her look beautiful enough to have tempted Satan and avenged Eve.

"She was half reclining on a couch, and was writing. No doubt what La Pudica wrote was an assignation for some lover — some fresh infidelity to Major Ydow, who swallowed them all as she devoured pleasure, in silence. When I entered, the letter was written, and she was melting the wax to seal it in the flame of a candle — a blue wax specked with silver, which I can still see, and you will soon learn why that blue wax specked with silver has stayed so clear in my memory.

"'Where is the major?' she asked, when she saw me enter. She was already agitated, but then she was always agitated, this woman who flattered men's conceit by always appearing to tremble before them.

"'He is playing frenetically this evening,' I replied, laughing and looking longingly at the sweet pink tint that had just suffused her face, 'but I have other desires this evening.'

"She understood me. Nothing surprised her. She was made for the desires she ignited in men and would have drawn men to her from all horizons.

"'Bah!' she said slowly, though the carnation tint I so adored on her lovely and abominable face grew deeper at the thought my words occasioned. 'Bah! Your desires have died!' And she pressed the seal on the burning wax, which cooled and hardened.

"'Look!' she said with provoking insolence. 'That is like you men. A moment ago it was burning, and now it is cold!'

"As she said this, she turned the letter and bent over it to write the address.

"Must I keep on repeating that I was not jealous of this woman? But



we are all the same. In spite of myself, I wished to see to whom she was writing, and to do that, as I was still standing, I leaned over her head; but my gaze was intercepted by her shoulders and that intoxicating velvety space between them which I had so often kissed. Magnetized by the sight, I added one kiss more, and the sensation prevented her from writing. She raised her head, which was bending over the table, as though she had been touched with a red-hot iron, and throwing herself back on the couch, gazed at me with that mixture of desire and embarrassment that was her great charm. Her eyes raised and turned to me, and as I was standing behind her, I was obliged to bestow upon the moist, pink, half-opened mouth what I had just let fall between her shoulders.

"Sensitive as she was, she had the nerves of a tiger.

"Suddenly she sprang to her feet.

"The major is coming upstairs,' she said. 'He must have lost, and he is jealous when he has lost. There will be a terrible scene. Go in here! I will get rid of him!' And she opened the door of a large cupboard in which her dresses hung, and pushed me in. I suppose there are few men who have not some time or other been put in a cupboard, when the husband or rightful owner arrived on the scene."

"You were lucky to have a cupboard," said Sélune. "I had once to get into a coal sack. That was before my damned wound, of course. I was in the White Hussars then. You may guess what state I was in when I came out of my coal sack."

"Yes," continued Mesnilgrand bitterly, "that is one of the drawbacks of adultery. At such a time, even the most spirited man loses his pride, and, in generous consideration for a frightened woman, becomes as cowardly as she is and commits the cowardice of hiding himself.

"It made me feel sick to find myself in a cupboard, in my uniform, and with my saber at my side, and covered with ridicule, for a woman who had no honor to lose and whom I did not love.

"But I had not much time to reflect upon the lowness of hiding there like a schoolboy in a dark cupboard, her dresses brushing against my face intoxicating me with the scent of her body. What I heard soon pulled me from this voluptuous sensation; the major had come in and, as she had guessed, was in a very bad humor and, as she had also said, had a jealous fit, and a jealousy all the more explosive because he concealed it from all of us. Suspicious and angry as he was, his eye probably fell on the letter which remained on the table and which my two kisses had prevented La Pudica from addressing.

"What is that letter?' he said, roughly.



"A letter for Italy,' replied La Pudica calmly.

"He was not deceived by this placid reply.

"That is not true!' he said rudely, for there was no need to scratch the Lauzun in this man to find the ruffian, and I understood at once what kind of life these two led together. From inside the cupboard, I could hear all that went on, and I could guess their actions from their words and the intonation of their voices. The major insisted on seeing this unaddressed letter, and La Pudica, who had seized it, obstinately refused to show it to him. Then the major tried to take it by force. I could hear the scuffling and rustling of a struggle between them, but, as you may suppose, the major was stronger than his wife. He got hold of the letter and read it. It was to give a rendezvous to one of her lovers, to offer him a happiness he had already enjoyed. But the lover was not named. Absurdly curious, like all jealous men, the major sought in vain for the name of the man for whom he was being deceived. And La Pudica was avenged for having had the letter taken away from her and her hand bruised, and perhaps bleeding, for I heard her cry during the struggle: 'You are hurting my hand, you wretch!'

"Wild with anger at not being able to learn the truth, and defied and mocked by this letter, which only told him one thing, that she had a lover — yet another lover — Major Ydow fell into one of those rages that dishonor a man, and riddled La Pudica with insults, insults that a coachman might have used. I thought that he would give her a thrashing. The blows did indeed come, but a little later. He reproached her — and in what terms! — with being . . . what she was. He was brutal, vile, revolting, and to all this fury she replied like a woman who cares little or nothing, who understands thoroughly the man to whom she is linked, and knows that their life must be a continual battle.

"She was less vile, but more atrocious, more insulting, and more cruel in her coolness than he was in his anger.

"She was insolent, ironic, laughing the hysterical laughter of hatred in its most acute paroxysms, and replying to the torrent of abuse that the major vomited forth with those remarks which women make when they want to drive us mad and which fall on our violence and rage like a handgrenade falling into gunpowder. Of all her coolly insulting words, the one with which she most often pricked him was that she did not love him, that she had never loved him. 'Never! never! never!' she repeated with a joyous fury, as though the declaration made her heart bound with joy.

"Now, nothing could have been more ferocious to this conceited man, whose beauty had ravaged so many and whose affection for her



was surpassed by his vanity, than this idea that she had never loved him. He could no longer bear the stings of this mercilessly repeated insult and obstinately refused to believe it.

"'And what about our child?' he foolishly asked, as though this were proof.

"'Ah, our child!' she replied with a burst of laughter. 'It was not yours!'

"I could imagine the expression in the major's green eyes when I heard his choked cry like that of a wildcat. He uttered a terrible oath.

"'Whose was it, then, cursed harlot?' he asked with something that was no longer a voice.

"But she continued to laugh like a hyena.

"'You shall never know,' she replied teasingly. And she lashed him with this 'you shall never know' a thousand times repeated, a thousand times inflicted on his ears, and when she was tired of saying it, she — would you believe it! — sang it as a refrain. Then, when she had made him spin like a top in the spirals of anxiety and uncertainty, when she had whipped him with this phrase until the man, beside himself with wrath, was in her hands but a puppet she was about to break; when with cynical hate she had named all her lovers, naming every officer there was, she cried: 'I have had them all, but none of them has had me! And that child you are stupid enough to think yours is the child of the only man I ever loved, I ever idolized. You haven't guessed who he is? You cannot guess who he is?'

"She lied. She had never loved any man. But she knew that this lie was a deadly stab, and she cut and slashed him with it, and when she was tired of being the torturer of this suppliant, she plunged this last confession, as one plunges a knife to its hilt, into his heart.

"'Well, as you can't guess, throw your tongue to the dogs, imbecile! It is Captain Mesnilgrand!'

"Probably this was another lie, but I wasn't so sure, and my own name struck me like a bullet coming through the door. After she had pronounced my name, there was complete silence. Has he killed her instead of replying? I said to myself, when suddenly I heard the splintering crash of a glass that had been thrown on the floor and had broken into a thousand pieces.

"I have told you that Major Ydow felt a deep, paternal love for the child he believed to be his, and his grief at the child's death had been long and lasting. As we were soldiers on a campaign, it was impossible for him to erect to his son a tomb and visit it every day — the idolatry of the grave — but the major had had his son's heart embalmed, in order



that he might carry it about with him everywhere, and had the heart enclosed in a crystal urn placed in the corner of his bedroom. It was this urn which was now shattered in pieces.

"Ah, it was not mine, miserable whore!" he cried, and I heard him grind the crystal under his feet and stamp on the heart he had believed to be his son's. No doubt she tried to pick it up, to save it from his fury, for I heard her throw herself upon him. But amid the sound of the struggle mingled another sound — that of blows.

"Well, if you want it, there is your brat's heart, shameless trollop!" said the major. And he beat her face with the heart he had so much adored, and even threw it at her head. The abyss calls unto the abyss, they say. Sacrilege created sacrilege.

"La Pudica, beside herself with passion, did what the major had done. She threw back the child's heart at the major's head, which, perhaps, she would not have done had the child not really been his — the offspring of the man she execrated, to whom she wished to render torture for torture, ignominy for ignominy. Surely this must have been the first time that such a sight was ever beheld by human eye! A father and a mother throwing in each other's faces the heart of their dead child!

"This impious combat must have lasted some minutes. It was so astonishingly tragic that I was unable to think of putting my shoulder to the door, bursting it open, and intervening, when a cry such as I have never heard, nor you either, gentlemen — and yet we have heard some frightful enough on the field of battle — gave me the strength to break the door open, and I saw . . . what I shall never see again.

"The major had pushed La Pudica down on the table where she had been writing, and held her with a grip of iron. All her clothes had been torn off in the struggle, and her beautiful, naked body twisted like a wounded snake beneath his grasp.

"But what do you think he was doing with his other hand, gentlemen? The writing table, the lighted candle, the wax lying by the side — all these had given the major an infernal suggestion — that of sealing his wife as she had sealed the letter, and he was steadily carrying out this monstrous sealing, this terrible vengeance of a perversely jealous lover!

"Be punished where you have sinned vile girl!" he cried.

"He did not see me. He was bending over his victim, who no longer cried out, and it was the pommel of his saber that he was using as a seal to press the burning wax.

"I rushed toward him. I did not even tell him to defend himself, and I plunged my saber up to the hilt in his back between the shoulders



and wished I could have plunged my hand and arm as well as my sword through his body that I might have killed him the more surely."

"You did well, Mesnil," said Commandant Sélune. "A scoundrel like that did not deserve to be killed in front, like one of us."

"Why, it was the adventure of Abelard — changed to Heloise," remarked Abbé Reniant.

"A fine surgical case," said Doctor Bleny, "and rare." Mesnilgrand was too excited to notice these remarks.

"He fell dead," he continued, "on the body of his fainting wife. I tore him away, threw down his body, and kicked the carcass. The shriek that La Pudica had given — wild as though it had come from the vulva of a she-wolf — and which still rings in my ears — brought the maid to the door. 'Run for the surgeon of the 8th Dragoons!' I cried. 'There is some work for him tonight.' But I had no time to wait for the surgeon. At that moment the bugles rang out the alarm and called us to arms. The enemy had crept up silently and cut the throats of our sentinels. I had to spring to my horse, but before I left I threw one last look on the beautiful mutilated body, lying motionless and, for the first time, pale before a man's eyes. Then I picked up the poor little heart which was lying in the dust on the floor and which they had used to insult and abuse each other, and carried it away in my hussar's belt — the heart of the child she said was mine."

Here Chevalier de Mesnilgrand stopped, overcome by an emotion that they all respected, ribald and materialist though they were.

"And La Pudica?" Rançonnet asked almost timidly. He was no longer toying with his glass.

"I never heard of La Rosalba again," replied Mesnilgrand. "Is she dead? Is she still alive? Was the surgeon able to go to her? After the surprise of Alcudia, which was so fatal to us, I looked for him. I could not find him. He had disappeared like many others and had not rejoined the remnants of our decimated regiment."

"Is that all?" said Mautravers. "And, if that is all, that's a fine sort of story. You were right, Mesnil, when you told Sélune that you would cap his story of the eighty nuns violated and thrown into a well. But as Rançonnet is dreaming in his chair, I will take up the question where he left it. What connection has your story with your devotions in the church the other day?"

"True," said Mesnilgrand. "You were right to remind me of it. This is what remains to be told to you and Rançonnet. For many years I carried around, as a relic, the heart of the child I supposed to be mine; but when, after Waterloo, I was obliged to take off the belt in which I



had hoped to die, and when I had carried that heart for some years longer — and I assure you, Mautravers, that it was heavy, though it may seem to you very light — reflection came with age, and I feared to profane, even a little more, that heart so profaned already, and I decided to place it in Christian ground.

“I spoke, therefore, to one of the priests of this town, without entering into all the details that I have given you today, and it was that heart, which had so long weighed on mine, that I had just placed in his hands in the confessional of the chapel, when Rançonnet grabbed me in the aisle.”

Captain Rançonnet was probably satisfied. He did not utter a syllable; nor did the others. No remarks were made. A silence, more expressive than any words, sealed the mouths of all.

Did these atheists at last understand that even if the Church had been established for nothing else but to receive those hearts — dead or alive — with which we no longer know what to do, it would be accomplishing a good work?

“Serve up the coffee,” said old M. de Mesnilgrand, in his high-pitched voice. “If it is as strong as your story, Mesnil, it will be good.”

## A WOMAN'S REVENGE

*Fortiter.*

I HAVE OFTEN heard of the daring of modern literature, but for my own part I have never believed in it. The reproach is merely an idle boast of morality. Literature, which has long been called the expression of society, does not express it at all — quite the reverse — and when some writer, bolder than the others, dares to go a little further than they do, heaven knows what a fuss is made.

If you examine the matter you will find that literature does not relate half the crimes that society commits mysteriously and with impunity every day, with delightful frequency and facility. Ask the confessors, who would be the greatest novelists the world has ever had if they could relate the stories that are whispered into their ears in the confession box. Inquire how many cases of incest (for example) are committed in the proudest and noblest families, and see if literature, which is so much accused of immoral boldness, has ever dared to relate them, even to terrify. Except for a slight breath — which is but a breath, after all — on the subject in *René* by Chateaubriand — the religious Chateaubriand — I do



not know of a book in which incest, an offense so common in our day, both in the upper and lower ranks of society, and perhaps more in the lower than in the upper, has been freely broached, and all the lessons of a truly tragic morality deduced therefrom. Has modern literature — at which prudery throws its little stone — ever *dared* to relate the histories of Myrrha, Agrippina, and Oedipus, which (believe me) are as alive today as they were then; for I have not lived — at least up to now — in any other hell but the social hell, and I have, for my own part, known and rubbed elbows with plenty of Myrrhas, Oedipuses, and Agrippinas in private life, and in the best society, as they say. Of course, nothing ever happens as it does on the stage or in a story. But glimpses may be seen under the social surface of precautions, fears, and hypocrisies.

I knew — and all of Paris knew — a Mme Henri III, who wore at her girdle a little chaplet of death's heads, mounted in gold and hanging down on her blue velvet dress; and who practiced self-flagellation, mingling her penance with the other pleasures of Henri III. Who would write the history of that woman, who composed pious words and whom the Jesuits believed to be a man (a nice detail that) and even a saint?

It is not many years ago since a lady of the Faubourg Saint-Germain took her mother's lover, and furious at seeing that lover return to her mother — who, because old, knew better than her daughter how to make herself loved — stole some of the letters her mother had addressed to this lover, had them lithographed and thrown by the thousands from the "Paradise" (well named for such an action) of the opera house on the night of a premiere! Who has ever written the story of that woman? If poor literature tried to tell such stories, it would not even know where to begin.

Yet that is what it would relate if it were bold.

History has many a Tacitus and Suetonius; the novel does not — at least not if one remains within the elevated and moral realm of talent and literature. It is true that the Latin language dares to be honest, like the pagan that it is, while our language was baptized with Clovis in the font of Saint-Remy and there contracted an imperishable modesty, for the old woman still blushes.

Nevertheless if a writer *dared to dare*, a Suetonius or a Tacitus might exist among the novelists, for the novel is specially the history of manners put in dramatic, narrative form, as history itself often is. There is only this difference between them; that the one (the novel) describes manners under the cover of invented characters, and the other (history) gives names and addresses. But the novel goes further than history. It has an ideal, while history does not, restrained by reality as it is. The



novel, too, holds the stage for a much longer period. Lovelace lasts longer in Richardson than Tiberius in Tacitus.

But if Tiberius in Tacitus were described as fully as Lovelace is in Richardson, do you think that history would lose by that, and that Tacitus would be less great? Of course, I am not afraid to say that Tacitus, as a painter, is beneath Tiberius as a model, and that in spite of all his genius, he is crushed by it.

And that is not all. To this striking but inexplicable failure in literature, when you compare its reality with the reputation it has, must be added the physiognomy that crime has assumed in these times of delightful progress. High civilization deprives crime of its terrible poetry and does not allow an author to restore it. "That would be too horrible," those people say who want to prettify everything, even the hideous. One of the advantages of philanthropy! Idiotic criminalists diminish the penalty, and inept moralists the crime, and yet they only diminish the latter in order to reduce the penalty. The crimes of high civilization, however, are certainly worse than those of extreme barbarism by the very fact of their refinement, the corruption they reveal, and their intellectual superiority. The Inquisition knew that well. At a time when religious faith and public manners were both strong, the Inquisition, the tribunal that judged thought — that great institution, the very idea of which puckers our weak nerves and turns our scatterbrained heads — the Inquisition knew well that spiritual crimes were the worst, and punished them as such.

And in fact if those crimes speak less to the senses, they speak more to the intellect; and the intellect, after all, is the deepest part of us. The novelist, therefore, can draw upon a whole realm of unknown tragic crimes, more intellectual than physical, which seem less criminal to the superficiality of an old, materialistic society because no blood was spilled, and the murder was within the domain of sentiment and custom.

It is of this kind of tragedy that I wish to give a specimen in relating the history of a vengeance of a most terribly original nature, in which no blood flowed, and neither steel nor poison was used; a *civilized* crime, in fact, in which the narrator has invented nothing but his manner of relating the story.

Toward the end of the reign of Louis-Philippe, a young man was strolling one evening along the Rue Basse-du-Rempart, which at that time well deserved its name Basse, for it was lower than the pavement of the boulevard and formed an excavation, always somber and badly lighted, and to which you descended from the boulevard by two stair-



cases that turned their backs to one another — if you can say that about two staircases. This excavation, which no longer exists, ran from the Chaussée d'Antin to the Rue Caumartin, where it again sloped upward. This dark ravine, where few ventured even in the daytime, was haunted at night. The Devil is the Prince of Darkness, and this was one of his principalities. Almost in the middle of this excavation, and bordered on one side by the boulevard, which formed a terrace, and on the other by some large, quiet-looking houses with carriage entrances and a few bric-a-brac shops, there was a narrow, uncovered passage, in which the wind — if there were ever so little wind — whistled down as though it were a flute, and this passage led to the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins.

The young man in question was well dressed, and he had taken this path, which was certainly not a path of virtue, because he was following a woman, who had entered this suspiciously dark passage without hesitation or embarrassment.

He was evidently a dandy, or, as it was called in those days, a "yellow glove." He had had a long dinner at the Café de Paris, and afterward had leaned against the low balcony (now removed) at Tortoni's, chewing his toothpick and ogling the women who passed along the boulevard. This particular woman had passed in front of him several times, and although this circumstance, and her gaudy dress and swaggering walk showed plainly what she was, and although this young man, who was called Robert de Tressignies, was horribly blasé and had returned from the East (where he had seen every variety and species of the animal woman), yet, the fifth time this nightwalker had passed him, he had followed her — *currishly*, as he said of himself, for he possessed the faculty of examining and judging his own acts, though his judgment did not prevent the acts, even when they were contrary to it — a terrible asymptote!

Tressignies was more than thirty years of age. He had already experienced the folly of youth which makes a man the buffoon of his own senses, and during which any woman exerts a magnetic influence over him. He was long past that. He was a libertine of the cold and calculating sort of that positive age — an intellectual libertine who had thought about those feelings of which he was no longer the dupe, and was neither afraid nor ashamed of any of them.

What he had seen, or what he thought he had seen, had aroused in him a curiosity to analyze a new sensation. He had therefore left his balcony and followed her, resolved to see to its end this vulgar adventure he had undertaken. For him, the woman who was gliding gracefully in front of him was merely a lower sort of prostitute, but she was



so beautiful that he could not help wondering why her beauty had not obtained her a higher position and why she had not found someone who would save her from the miseries of the streets, for in Paris, whenever God puts a pretty woman there, the Devil in reply immediately puts a fool to keep her.

And then Robert de Tressignies had another reason for following her, besides her wondrous beauty (which perhaps the Parisians did not see, for they know very little about true beauty, their aesthetic democratized like everything else). She resembled someone he had seen. She was the mockingbird that imitates the nightingale, of which Byron speaks with such melancholy in his memoirs. She reminded him of another woman. He was certain, absolutely certain that it was not she, but she resembled her enough to be mistaken for her, if being mistaken for her had not been impossible. He was, moreover, more attracted than surprised by this, for he had enough experience as an observer to know that, in the long run, there is much less variety than is imagined in human faces, the features of which are ruled by hard and fast geometrical laws and are easily classified into a few types. Beauty is single. Only ugliness is multiple, and even then its multiplicity is soon exhausted. God wanted infinite variety to exist only in the physiognomy, because the physiognomy is the reflection of the soul across the lines — straight or erratic, natural or contorted — of the face.

Tressignies said all this confusedly to himself as he followed this woman walking sinuously along the boulevard. She looked prouder than Tintoretto's Queen of Sheba, in her dress of saffron satin with gold tones — that color so loved by young Roman women — and as she walked the shiny folds rustled and shone and seemed a call to arms. She arched her back excessively, something rarely seen in France, and she wore a magnificent Turkish shawl with wide stripes of white, scarlet, and gold; the red feather of her white hat — splendid in its bad taste — hung down to her shoulder. At that time, women wore long drooping feathers that they called "weeping willows."

But there was nothing weeping about this woman, and her feather expressed something other than melancholy.

Tressignies thought she would take the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, sparkling with its thousand lamps, and was surprised to see all the showy finery of the courtesan, all the impudent pride of the harlot intoxicated by herself and by her silks disappear into the Rue Basse du Rempart — the disgrace of the boulevard at that time.

The dandy, less brave than she, hesitated to risk his polished boots in such a street, but only for a second. The gold dress, lost for an instant



in the shadows of this dark hole, where a solitary street lamp flickered, reappeared in the distance, and he hastened to it. He had not much difficulty; she was waiting for him, sure that he would come, and as he came up to her she looked him full in the face, meeting his glance with all the effrontery of her trade. He was literally blinded by the beauty of the face, which, though plastered with rouge, was of a golden brown, like the wings of certain insects, and which the dim light falling from the lamp could not pale.

"Are you Spanish?" said Tressignies, who saw that she was one of the purest types of that race.

"Sí," she replied.

To be Spanish was quite something at that time, something valued on the market. The novels of those days, the plays of Clara Gazul, the poetry of Alfred de Musset, the dances of Mariano Camprubi and Dolores Serral, had caused these tawny women with cheeks of pomegranate to be prized, and many women claimed to be Spanish who were not Spanish at all. But this woman appeared to take no special pride in her nationality.

"Are you coming?" she said brusquely, with all the familiarity of the last whore on the Rue des Poulies. Do you remember her? She was foul!

The tone, the harsh, hoarse voice, the sudden familiarity, so heavenly upon the lips of a woman you love but so horribly insolent in the mouth of a creature to whom you are but a passerby, would have sufficed to disgust Tressignies, but the Devil tempted him. Curiosity, spiced with desire, seized him, seeing this woman, who was more to him than superb flesh wrapped in satin, and for whom he would have swallowed not only Eve's apple, but all the toads in a marsh.

"By God! of course I am," he replied. As though she could doubt it! "I will throw myself in with the wash tomorrow," he thought.

They entered the passage that leads to the Rue des Mathurins. Amid the huge blocks of stone that lay about and the buildings that were being erected, there stood one house alone, darker than the already black sky — a narrow, ugly, grim, and trembling house which must have seen vice and crime on every floor of its old crumbling walls, and which perhaps had been left there that it might see more still. A blind-looking house, for not one of its windows (and windows are the eyes of a house) was lighted — a house that seemed to cling to you as it groped in the night. This horrible house had its door ajar, as is usual in such places, and at the end of a miserable corridor was the staircase, the first few steps of which were lighted from above by a dirty lamp.

The woman entered the narrow passage, which was filled by her



shoulders and her sweeping, rustling dress, and with a step evidently accustomed to such ascensions, she nimbly climbed the winding staircase, snail-like in its viscosity.

But, what was rather unusual in such a den, the dirty staircase grew lighter as you ascended, and at the first floor it was no longer a feeble glimmer from the stinking oil lamp, but a strong light, which became splendid when the second floor was reached. Two bronze griffins, fastened to the wall, bore a number of candles and illuminated with strange luxury a common-looking door, on which was pasted a card with the prostitute's name, so that visitors would know whose room they were entering.

Surprised at this unexpected magnificence in such a place, Tressignies paid more attention to these candelabra, which had evidently been wrought by the hand of a skillful artist, than to the card that bore the woman's name, which he did not need to know since he accompanied her. As he looked at them, while she turned the key in the lock of the door so curiously ornamented and flooded with light, he remembered the *surprises* that were often found in the houses of prostitutes in the days of Louis XV. "This woman," he thought to himself, "has read some novel or some memoirs of those times and has had a whim to fill her apartment with all sorts of voluptuous coqueties where you would never have expected to find them."

But what he saw when the door was opened, increased his astonishment — but in a very different manner.

It was in fact only the ordinary, untidy room of the common prostitute. Dresses thrown here and there on all the furniture, a big bed — the field of her maneuvers — with those immoral mirrors at the end and on the ceiling, showed well what sort of an occupant the apartment had. On the mantelpiece were bottles of perfume, carelessly left open when she started out on her evening prow, and the odors, mingling with the warm air of the room, formed an atmosphere in which a man's energy would melt away at the third breath he took. Two candelabra, similar to those at the door, burned on either side of the fireplace. Skins of various animals were thrown down over the carpet. Through a half-open door a mysterious dressing room could be seen — the vestry of these priestesses.

Tressignies did not notice all these details until later. He saw nothing at first but the woman. Knowing where he was, he did as he liked. He threw himself on the sofa and made the woman, who had taken off her hat and shawl and thrown them on an armchair, stand between his knees. He took her by the waist, as though he would have spanned it



with his two hands, and looked at her from head to feet, like a drinker who raises his glass to the light before sipping the wine. The impression he had formed on the boulevard had not deceived him. Blasé and accustomed to women as he was, he could not help owning she was splendid. The resemblance that had struck him so much in the moving light and shadow of the street, remained in the fixed light of the room. But the person of whom she made him think, though her features were so like that they seemed identical, had not that expression of resolute and almost terrible pride that the Devil, the father of all anarchy, had refused to a duchess and had given — for what purpose? — to a street-walker. When she had bared her head, her black hair, yellow dress, and her broad shoulders, which were surpassed in breadth by her hips, she reminded you of the Judith by Vernet (a picture of that period), but her body was more suited for the sports of love and her face was even more ferocious.

This grim ferocity was perhaps due to a wrinkle that divided her beautiful eyebrows, and extended to her temple: Tressignies had seen the same thing in some Asiatic women in Turkey. It seemed a striking contrast that this woman had the figure of her profession, but not the face. The harlot's body seemed to say eloquently: "Take me" — yet this cup of love with rounded flanks which invited both the hands and lips was surmounted by a face the haughty pride of which would have arrested desire and petrified the hottest lust into respect.

Happily, the ready smile of the courtesan, with which she was able to profane the ideally scornful curve of her lips, attracted to her those whom the cruel pride of her face would have terrified. On the boulevard she had displayed this alluring smile shamelessly, but now, when she was standing in front of Tressignies and between his knees, she was serious, and her face wore such a stern implacable look that if she had had a curved saber in her hands, the dandy, Tressignies, could, without conceit, have imagined himself Holophernes.

He took hold of her unarmed hands and remarked how beautifully formed they were. She silently allowed him to examine her, and she also looked at him, not with the futile curiosity or sordid interest of women of her sort, who look at you as you would look at a doubtful coin. Evidently there was something beyond the gain she was about to make or the pleasure she was about to give. There was in her flared nostrils, which were quite as expressive as her eyes and seemed to dart forth flames as her eyes did, a stern decision, as of that of some crime to be committed. "If the implacable look of that face were due to love, what a piece of good fortune for her and for me in these empty, hollow-



hearted days!" thought Tressignies, who, before he got rid of a whim, examined it as though it were an English horse.

He, experienced and critical in the matter of women, who had bought the most beautiful girls in the market at Adrianople and who knew the price of human flesh of that color and firmness, threw, as the price of a couple of hours with this woman, a handful of louis into a blue crystal cup that was placed on a level with his hand on a console table. The cup had probably never received so much gold.

"Ah, you like me, then?" she cried boldly, perhaps impatient at the long examination, in which curiosity had seemed more powerful than desire and which had been either a loss of time for her or an impertinence. "Let me take all this off," she added, as though her dress weighed heavily upon her, as she pulled open the buttons.

She sprang from his knees and hurried into the dressing room. A prosaic detail! Did she want to spare her dress? The dress is the tool of these workers. Tressignies, who thought he had detected in her face the unquenchable lust of a Messalina, was brought face to face with the commonplace. He felt once more that he was in the chamber of a prostitute — a common prostitute of Paris, in spite of a face so out of keeping with the destiny of her to whom it belonged. "Bah!" he thought, "poetry is only skin deep with these women; you must take it where you can find it." And he promised himself he would take it there.

In following this woman, he had but obeyed an irresistible curiosity, a vulgar whim, but when she who had inspired these feelings came out of her dressing room, where she had taken off her habiliments, and came toward him in the costume which was not one of a gladiatrix about to fight, he was literally thunderstruck by a beauty that his experienced eye — the sculptor's eye that real lovers of women have — had not entirely divined on the boulevard, in spite of the whispered revelations of the dress and the walk. If lightning had suddenly come through the door instead of her, he could not have been more profoundly struck.

She was not completely naked, it was worse. She was much more indecent than if she had been utterly nude. Statues are naked, and their nakedness is chaste. It is even a boasted chastity. But this woman, who was wickedly immodest, who would have ignited herself, like one of the living torches of the garden of Nero, that she might better incite the passions of men, and who had no doubt been taught by her profession all the common tricks of depravity, had combined the insidious transparency of gauze and the daring of bare flesh, with the genius and bad taste of abominable libertinism — for who does not know that in libertinism bad taste has power?



The details of this monstrously provocative outfit reminded Tressignies of that indescribable statuette before which he had sometimes stopped, for it was in every shop where bronzes were sold, and upon the pedestal of which you read nothing but the mysterious inscription: "Madame Husson." A dangerous obscene dream! The dream here was a reality. Before that arousing reality, that perfect beauty which had not the coldness perfect beauty too often has, Tressignies, who had just returned from Turkey, had he been the most blasé Pasha of Three Tails, would have recovered the emotion of a Christian, or even of an anchorite.

So, when she came hurriedly toward him, certain of the effect she would produce, and placed, almost against his mouth, the magnificent charms of her bosom, with a movement like that of the courtesan who tempts the saint in the picture by Veronese, Robert de Tressignies, who was not a saint, yearned for what she offered him, and took the burning temptress in his arms with a passion that she reciprocated, for she threw herself into them. Did she throw herself like that into the arms of everyone who embraced her? However skillful she might have been in the arts and profession of the prostitute, she could not always have been as furious and ardent as she was that night, and which not even exceptional excitement or morbid desire would explain. Had she only just begun the horrible profession, that she exercised it with so much ardor? There seemed so much of the wild beast about her that one would have thought she either wished to lose her own life or take that of the other in each of her caresses. At that time the Parisian prostitutes, who did not think the pretty name of *lorette*, which literature had bestowed upon them and which Gavarni had immortalized, was sufficiently serious, had adopted the Oriental sobriquet of "panther." Not one of them had a better right to be called a panther. She had all the suppleness, the activity, the bounds, the scratches, and the bites. Tressignies could testify that no woman who had ever been in his arms up to then had given him such indescribable sensations as this creature gave him in a delirium of contagious lust; even though Tressignies had loved.

Yet, whether to the glory or to the shame of human nature, in what we call pleasure (with an excess of scorn, perhaps) there are abysses as deep as those of love. Was it in these abysses that she overwhelmed him, as the sea overwhelms a strong swimmer in its depths? She greatly surpassed the most reprehensible memories of this hardened libertine and the limits of his violent and depraved imagination. He forgot everything — what she was, why he had come, the house and the room, which, when he had entered it, had almost sickened him. She had positively drawn his soul into her own body. She rendered him delirious,



though his senses were not easily intoxicated. She satiated him with such voluptuous delights that at one time this atheist in love, this sceptic in all things, had the foolish thought that he had taken the fancy of this woman who bartered her body. Yes, Robert de Tressignies, who had almost the same cold, steely character as his model, Robert Lovelace, believed that he must have inspired a caprice, at least, in the heart of this prostitute, who could not behave like that with everybody without being soon consumed by her own lust.

He thought this for two minutes, like a fool, this clever man! But the vanity she had lighted with the fire of a pleasure as burning as love, felt, between two caresses, the shiver of a sudden doubt. A voice cried to him from the depths of his soul: "It is not yourself she loves in you," for he had noticed that when she was the most pantherish and was clinging to him the most lovingly, she was absorbed in the contemplation of a bracelet she wore on her arm and which Tressignies saw contained the portrait of a man. Some words in Spanish, which Tressignies, who did not know the language and did not understand, mingled with the cries of the bacchante, and seemed to him to be addressed to this portrait.

Then the idea that he was *passing for someone else*, that he was there on account of another — this fact, unfortunately so common in our miserable habits, with the overheated and depraved state of our imaginations, this compensation for the impossible in fanatical souls who cannot have the object of their desire and who throw themselves upon an appearance, flashed across his mind and chilled his passion to ferocity. In one of those fits of absurd jealousy and tigerish vanity over which man has no control, he seized her arm roughly and demanded to see this bracelet that she regarded with an ardor which was certainly not intended for him, though at such a moment all of this woman ought to have belonged to him.

"Show me that portrait!" he said in a voice that was even harder than his hand.

She understood, but showed no indignation.

"Surely you cannot be jealous of a girl like me," she said. But it was not the word *girl* that she employed. To the surprise of Tressignies, it was the coarsest epithet, something a criminal would have used to insult her.

"Do you want to see it?" she added. "Well, look!" And she placed before his eyes her beautiful arm, still dripping with the intoxicating sweat of the pleasure in which they had been indulging.

It was the portrait of an ugly, puny man, with an olive complexion and youthful black eyes, very somber, but not without an air of nobility —



the air of a bandit or a Spanish grandee. And he must have been a Spanish grandee, for around his neck was the ribbon of the Golden Fleece.

"Where did you get that?" said Tressignies, who thought to himself: She will spin me a yarn about how she was seduced; the story of the "first one" — the standard story all these women tell.

"Get!" she replied indignantly. "*Por dios*, it was he himself who gave it to me!"

"He! Who? Your lover, no doubt?" said Tressignies. "You deceived him. He drove you away, and you have come down to this."

"He is not my lover," she replied coldly, as insensible to the insult of this supposition as though she had been of bronze.

"Perhaps he is not any longer," said Tressignies. "But you love him still — I saw it just now in your eyes."

She laughed bitterly.

"Ah, don't you know the difference between love and hate?" she cried. "Love that man! Why, I detest him! He is my husband!"

"Your husband!"

"Yes, my husband," she said, "the greatest noble in all Spain; thrice a duke, four times a marquis, five times a count, grandee of Spain, and knight of the Golden Fleece. I am the Duchess of Arcos de Sierra Leone."

Tressignies, almost thunderstruck by these incredible words, had not the slightest doubt as to the truth of this astounding statement. He was sure the girl was not lying. He *had* recognized her. The likeness that had so much struck him on the boulevards was justified.

He had met her before, and not so very long ago either.

It was at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, where he had gone for the bathing season. That year, it happened that all the best Spanish society had visited this little town on the coast of France; it is so close to Spain that you may still imagine yourself in Spain, and even the most patriotic Spaniards could vacation there without treason to their country. The duchess of Sierra Leone had resided all that summer in that little town so profoundly Spanish in its manners, character, appearance, and historical associations, for — it may be remembered — it was there that the marriage festivities of Louis XIV were celebrated — the only king of France, by the way, who resembled a Spanish king — and it was also there that the Princess of Ursins lost her great fortune.

The duchess of Sierra Leone was then, it was said, on her honeymoon, after her marriage to the greatest and richest nobleman in Spain. When Tressignies arrived in this fishing village, the birthplace of some of the most terrible filibusters the world has ever known, she was displaying a luxury and extravagance such as the place had never known



since the days of Louis XIV; and her beauty even surpassed that of the Basque women, though they, with their beautiful classical figures and aquamarine eyes, the palest blue-green, fear few rivals.

Attracted by her beauty, and being, by birth and fortune, able to enter any society, Robert de Tressignies had endeavored to get an introduction to her, but the little circle of Spanish society of which the duchess was the center was strictly closed that year to all the French who were passing the season at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. The duchess, seen from afar, either on the beach, or at church, left without his being able to make her acquaintance, and for that reason she had remained in his memory like a meteor, all the more brilliant because it passes, never to be seen again. He had traveled in Greece and part of Asia, but of all the most beautiful women of those countries in which beauty holds such a high place that the inhabitants cannot conceive a heaven without it, he had seen no one who could efface the image of the duchess.

And now, by a strange and incomprehensible chance, this duchess, admired for an instant and then gone, had returned into his life by the most incredible means. She was leading an infamous life; he had bought her. She had belonged to him. She was nothing more than a prostitute, and a prostitute of the lowest class, for there are ranks even in infamy. The superb duchess of Sierra Leone, of whom he had dreamed and whom he had, perhaps, loved — a dream is so near love in our souls! — was nothing more — could it really be possible? — than a streetwalker in Paris! It was she who had been in his arms but a few moments before, as she had been in the arms of another — any comer, like himself — the previous night, and as she would be in the arms of a third tomorrow, or — who knows? — perhaps in another hour. This terrible discovery struck him like a hammer of ice.

The man in him, delirious and burning with passion but a minute before, was now sobered, chilled, crushed. The idea — the certainty — that she was really the duchess of Sierra Leone had not revived his desires, which had been extinguished as suddenly as a candle that is blown out, and his mouth no longer sought to take long ardent drafts of the delights of which he had drunk. By revealing herself, the duchess had caused the courtesan to disappear. To him, she was now only the duchess — but in what a condition! soiled, ruined, lost, a woman adrift, fallen from a greater height than the Leucadian rock into a filthy and disgusting sea of mud, from which nothing could rescue her.

He looked at her with a haggard eye, as she sat there, upright and grim, metamorphosed and tragic, at the extremity of the couch on which they had been sprawled — a Messalina changed at once into some



mysterious Agrippina. He no longer cared to touch, even with the tip of his finger, that creature whose strong limbs he had just kneaded with idolatrous hands, who had made his blood boil, in order to prove that she was not an illusion, that he was not dreaming, that he was not mad! The duchess had emerged from the harlot, and the phenomenon had stunned him.

"Yes," he said with an effort, for his voice stuck in his throat, what he had just heard so choked him. "I believe you" — he no longer addressed her familiarly — "for I recognize you. I saw you at Saint-Jean-de-Luz three years ago."

At the name, her face lighted up for a moment.

"Ah," she said, "I was then enjoying all the intoxications of life — and now!"

The gleam died out of her eyes, but she did not lower her head.

"And now?" echoed Tressignies.

"Now," she said, "it is the intoxication of vengeance. But I will make it so deep," she added with concentrated violence, "that I will die in that vengeance; like the mosquitoes in my country, which die, gorged with blood, in the wound they have made."

And reading the expression on Tressignies's face, she said:

"You do not understand, but I will make you understand. You know what I am, but you do not know all that I am. Would you like to know? Would you like to hear my story? Shall I tell it to you?" she went on with excited persistence. "I would like to tell it to all who come here. I would like to tell it to all the world. I will be more degraded, but I will be the better avenged."

"Tell me!" said Tressignies, captivated as he had never been before, either by life, by novels, or by theater; for it seemed this woman was going to tell him things he had never heard. He thought no more of her beauty. He looked at her as though he were about to assist at the autopsy on her dead body. Was she about to revive it for him?

"Yes," she continued, "I have often wished to relate my history to those who come up here; but they say they didn't come here to hear stories. When I begin, they interrupt me or they go away — brutes gorged with what they have obtained. Either indifferent, or mocking, or insulting, they call me a liar or a mad woman. They do not believe me, but you will believe me. You have seen me at Saint-Jean-de-Luz in all the glory of a happy woman, in the highest position, and wearing as a diadem that name of Sierra Leone which I now trail at the hem of my skirt through all the filth, as in old days they used to drag by a horse's tail the shield of a dishonored knight.



"That name, which I hate and only bear that I may degrade it, is still borne by the greatest lord of all Spain and the proudest of all those who have the privilege to keep their hats on before His Majesty the King; for he thinks himself ten times more noble than the king. What are the most illustrious houses that have reigned over Spain — Castile, Aragon, Transtamare, Austria, and Bourbon — to the Duke of Arcos de Sierra Leone? He is, he says, of older family than they. He is descended from the old Gothic kings and is allied by Brunehild to the Merovingians of France. He prides himself on having nothing but 'blue blood' in his veins, while even the oldest families, degraded by misalliances, have little more than a few drops.

"Don Christoval d'Arcos, Duke of Sierra Leone and *otros ducados*, made no misalliance in marrying me. I am a Turre-Cremata, of the old family of the Turre-Crematas of Italy — the last of the Turre-Crematas, for the race ends with me, who am well fitted to bear the name of Turre-Cremata [burned tower], for I have been burned with all the fires of hell. The Grand Inquisitor, Torquemada, who was descended from the Turre-Crematas, inflicted fewer tortures in all his life than there are in my accursed breast.

"I must tell you that the Turre-Crematas were not less proud than the Sierra Leones. Divided into two branches, both equally illustrious, they were for centuries all-powerful in Italy and Spain. In the fifteenth century, during the pontificate of Alexander VI, the Borgias, in the intoxication of their good fortune, wished to appear connected with all the royal families of Europe, and said that they were related to us; but the Turre-Crematas scornfully denied the assertion, and two of them paid with their lives for their proud audacity. They were, it is said, poisoned by Cesare Borgia.

"My marriage with the duke of Sierra Leone was a match between two families. Neither on his side nor on mine was there any sentiment in the union. It was quite natural that a Turre-Cremata should marry a Sierra Leone. It was quite natural, even to me, brought up as I was in the terrible etiquette of the old Spanish families, which reflected that of the Escorial — that hard and stifling etiquette which would stop hearts from beating, unless the hearts were stronger than this iron corset.

"I was one of those hearts. I loved Don Esteban. Before I met him, my married life was without happiness — the grave thing that marriage used to be in ceremonious, Catholic Spain, though it is not the rule now, except in a few aristocratic families that preserve the old customs. The duke of Sierra Leone was too much of a Spaniard not to keep up the old custom. All that you have heard in France about Spanish grav-



ity and the manners of that proud, silent, and moody race was true and more than true of the duke.

"Too proud to live elsewhere than on his own estates, he inhabited a feudal castle on the Portuguese border, and his habits were more feudal than his castle. I lived there with him and divided my time between my confessor and my waiting women — a sumptuous, monotonous, and sad life, which would have crushed a weaker mind than mine with boredom. But I had been brought up for what I was, the wife of a great Spanish nobleman. Then I had the religious sentiment of a woman of my rank and was nearly as passionless as the portraits of my ancestresses (with their great, stern expressions, and iron corsets) which hung in the vestibules and rooms of the castle of Sierra Leone. I should have added a generation the more to this row of irreproachable, majestic women whose virtue was guarded by their pride as a fountain is guarded by a lion.

"The solitude in which I lived did not weigh upon my soul, which was as peaceful as the mountains of red marble surrounding Sierra Leone. I did not suspect that under that marble slept a volcano. I was in a limbo, like an unborn child, but I was about to be born and receive, by one look from a man, the baptism of fire.

"Don Esteban, Marquis of Vasconcellos, of a Portuguese family and cousin to the duke, came to Sierra Leone, and love, of which I had no idea beyond what I had gleaned from a few mystical books, swooped down upon my heart as an eagle swoops down on and carries off a child who cries out. I cried out also. I was a Spanish woman of old family. My pride rebelled against what I felt in the presence of this dangerous man, Esteban, who exercised such a terrible influence over me. I told the duke to make some pretext to get rid of him, to have him leave the castle at once — that I saw he was in love with me, and I was offended by this insolence. But Don Christoval replied as did the duke of Guise when warned that Henri III would assassinate him: 'He would not dare!' It was contempt for Destiny, which avenged itself by fulfilling itself. That reply threw me into the arms of Esteban."

She paused for an instant; listening to her speak, he would have known, by her words alone, that she was, without any doubt, who she said she was — the duchess of Sierra Leone. Ah! the streetwalker of the boulevard was entirely obliterated. You would have declared that a mask had fallen and that the real face, the real person, had reappeared. Even her bearing had become chaste. While she was speaking, she had taken a shawl from the sofa behind her and wrapped it around that "cursed" breast, as she had called it, which prostitution had not been able to



rob of its round perfection and virgin firmness. Even her voice had lost the hoarseness it had when she was in the street. Was the illusion produced by what she said? It seemed to Tressignies that her voice sounded purer and clearer — that she had recovered her nobility.

"I do not know," she continued, "whether other women are like me. But that incredulous pride of Don Christoval, that disdainful and calm 'He would not dare,' in speaking of the man I loved, seemed to me an insult to him who had already, in the very depths of my being, taken possession of me like a God. 'Prove to him that you dare,' I said to him that same evening when I declared my love. There was no need to tell him. Esteban had loved me from the first day he saw me. Our love was simultaneous, like two pistol shots that are fired together, and kill.

"I had done my duty as a Spanish woman in warning Don Christoval. I owed him nothing but my life, as I was his wife, for the heart is not free to love; and my life he would certainly have taken had he driven away Don Esteban as I wished. My heart had so overflowed that it would have driven me mad not to see him again, and I exposed myself to that terrible chance. But as the duke, my husband, had not understood that — since he thought himself so superior to Vasconcellos that he deemed it impossible for him to lift his eyes or pay court to me — I did not push my conjugal heroism any further, in opposition to a love that ruled me.

"I will not endeavor to give you an exact idea of that love. Perhaps you would not believe me if I did. But, after all, what does it matter what you would believe? You may believe me or not believe me! It was a love at once both burning and chaste — a chivalric, romantic, almost ideal, almost mystic love. It is true that we were both hardly twenty years old and that we belonged to the same race as Bivar, Ignatius Loyola, and Saint Teresa. Ignatius, the knight of the Virgin, did not love the Queen of Heaven more purely than Vasconcellos loved me; and I, for my part, felt for him something of that ecstatic love which Saint Teresa had for her divine Spouse.

"Adultery? Bah! Did it even enter our minds to be adulterous? Our hearts beat so high in our chests, we lived in an atmosphere of sentiments so transcendent and elevated that we felt nothing of the evil lusts and sensuality of vulgar love. We lived under a clear, blue sky; but the sky was Africa, and the blue was a fire. Could souls exist under such conditions? Was it possible for it to last? Were we not playing, without knowing or suspecting it, at the most dangerous game in which weak mortals could indulge, and were we not bound to be precipitated sooner or later from this stainless height?



"Esteban was as pious as a priest or a Portuguese knight of the time of Albuquerque; and assuredly I was no worse than he, for I had in him and his love for me a faith that kindled the purity of my love. I lived in his heart like a Madonna in its niche of gold, with a lamp at her feet — an unextinguishable lamp! He loved my soul for my soul. He was one of those few lovers who wish to ennoble the woman they adore. He wanted me to be noble, devoted, heroic — one of the great women of those times when Spain was great. He would rather have seen me do a good deed than waltz with me mouth to mouth. If the angels before the throne of God love one another, they must love as we loved.

"We were so enwrapped in each other that we passed long hours alone together, hand in hand, eyes meeting eyes, able to do anything, for we were alone, but so happy that we desired nothing more. Sometimes this immense happiness that filled us, pained us by its very intensity, and we wished to die — but with each other and for each other, and we understood then the saying of Saint Teresa, 'I die of being unable to die!' — that desire of the finite creature succumbing under an infinite love and thinking to give more scope to the torrent of infinite love by the annihilation of life. I am now the lowest of soiled creatures, but at that time the lips of Esteban had never touched mine, but if he kissed a rose and I kissed it after him, it made me swoon. In this sea of horror in which I plunged voluntarily, I remember each instant, as my punishment, the divine joys of the pure love in which we lived, lost, absorbed, and so transparent, no doubt, in the innocence of our sublime affection, that Don Christoval had not much difficulty in seeing that we adored each other. We lived with our heads in the skies. How could we perceive that he was jealous, and with what kind of jealousy? The only one of which he was capable: the jealousy of pride.

"He did not take us by surprise; only those who conceal themselves can be surprised. We did not conceal ourselves. Why would we? Our love was like the flame burning in open day, which can be perceived even in the daylight, and, besides, our happiness was so great that it could not fail to be seen, and the duke saw it. Blinded as he was with pride, the splendor of our love dazzled his eyes. Ah! Esteban had *dared*. So had I! One evening we were, as usual, gazing at one another, and he was at my feet before me, as before the Virgin Mary, in a contemplation so profound that we needed no caress. Suddenly, the duke entered with two Negroes whom he had brought back from the Spanish colonies, of which he was for a long time governor.

"We did not see them, lost as we were in the heavenly contemplation that elevated our souls while uniting them, when Esteban's head



fell heavily on my knees. He was strangled! The Negroes had thrown around his neck that terrible lasso with which Mexicans strangle wild bulls. It was done with the rapidity of lightning. But it was lightning that did not kill me. I did not faint, I did not cry out. No tears came to my eyes. I remained silent and rigid, in a nameless state of horror, from which I could not escape without a violent wrench to my soul. I felt as though my breast had been opened and my heart torn out. Alas! It was not mine that was torn out, but Esteban's. The corpse of Esteban, which lay at my feet strangled, was cut open, and the hands of these monsters groped in it as though it had been a sack!

"My love caused me to feel as much as Esteban would have himself felt had he been alive. I felt the pain his corpse could not feel, and it was that which released me from the horror that had seized me when they strangled him. I threw myself upon them. 'Kill me also!' I cried. 'I wish to die the same death!' and I stretched forth my neck for the cord. They were about to put it around.

"'Touch not the queen!' said the duke, that proud duke who thought himself greater than the king, and he drove away the Negroes with his riding whip.

"'No! you shall live, Madame,' he said, 'in order that you may always remember that which you are about to see.'

"He whistled. Two enormous savage dogs rushed in.

"'Give the heart of the traitor,' he said, 'to these dogs.'

"At that, a feeling — I know not of what — overcame me.

"'Seek a better revenge than that!' I cried. 'It is I you should make eat it.'

"He seemed astounded at the idea.

"'You love him, then, so furiously?' he said.

"Ah! I loved him with a love my husband had rendered boundless. I loved him so that I should have felt neither fear nor disgust at that bleeding heart, filled with me, and still warm with me — and I wished to join that heart to mine. I prayed for it on my knees with joined hands.

"I wished to spare that noble, adored heart that impious, sacrilegious profanation.

"I would have communed with that heart as with a host. Was he not my God?

"I remembered Gabrielle de Vergy, whose story Esteban and I had so often read together. I envied her! I deemed her happy to have made her breast the living tomb of the man she loved. But the sight of such a love made the duke fiercely implacable.



"His dogs devoured Esteban's heart before me. I fought with them for it, but I could not snatch it from them.

"They covered me with dreadful bites and tore my dress with their bloody jaws."

She paused. These memories had made her face become livid. She arose breathlessly, and, opening a drawer, took from it and showed to Tressignies a dress, torn to tatters and stained with blood in many places.

"Look!" she said. "That is the heart's blood of the man I loved, the heart I could not save from the dogs. When the thought of the accursed life I am leading occurs to me, when I am filled with disgust, when the filth rises to my mouth and chokes me, when the spirit of vengeance is weak within me, when the former duchess returns and the harlot shocks me, I wrap myself in this dress, my soiled body wallows in its red folds that still burn me, and my vengeance revives. There is a talisman in these bloody rags! When they are around my body the rage for vengeance grips me, and I recover strength that, it seems to me, will last for an eternity."

Tressignies shuddered as he heard this terrifying woman. He shuddered at her gestures, her words, her face, which was like that of a Gorgon. He seemed to see around her head the snakes this woman had in her heart.

He began to understand — the curtain was drawn! — the word *vengeance* that was ever on her lips.

"Vengeance! Yes," she continued. "You understand now what my vengeance is. Ah! I have chosen it among all others, as you choose among all kinds of daggers that which will create the most suffering — the toothed blade that will best tear the flesh of the hated being you kill. I did not wish to kill that man with one blow.

"Had he killed Vasconcellos with his sword, like a gentleman? No, he had had him killed by his varlets. He had thrown his heart to the dogs and his body on the dunghill, perhaps. I did not know. I have never known. Kill him, for that? No! That would have been too gentle, too quick! I needed a vengeance that was slower and more cruel. Besides, the duke was brave. He did not fear death. Every generation of the Sierra Leones had faced it courageously. But his pride, his enormous pride, was cowardly when it concerned dishonor. I thus had to torture him in his pride. I had to dishonor the name of which he was so proud. I swore to myself that I would drag that name through the most stinking mire, that I would turn it into shame, filth, and excrement! — and for that I have become what I am, a common harlot, the prostitute Sierra Leone, who picked you up tonight!"



As she said these last words her eyes sparkled as though with the joy of a well-struck blow.

"But," said Tressignies, "does the duke know what you have become?"

"If he does not know it now, he will know it some day," she replied with the absolute confidence of a woman who has thought of and calculated every chance and who is sure of the future. "The stain of my shame is sure to reach him some day or other. One of the men who has come here will spit in his face his wife's dishonor, and that spittle will never be wiped off; but that is only a chance, and I would not leave my vengeance to chance. That my vengeance be quite sure, I have resolved to die of it, and my death will assure my revenge."

Tressignies could not guess the meaning of these last words, but her next sentence threw a hideous light upon them.

"I wish to die as prostitutes like me do die," she continued. "Do you not know that there was a man in the time of François I who caught, from a woman like me, a terrible and shameful disease, that he might give it to his wife to poison the king, whose mistress she was, and thus he might be avenged on both? I would do no less than that man did. The shameful life I lead will some day cause the putrefaction of debauchery to gnaw the prostitute, and then I shall rot away and die in some hospital. Oh, then I shall have paid the debt I owe," she added with the enthusiasm of this most terrible hope. "Then it will be time enough for the duke of Sierra Leone to learn how his wife, the duchess of Sierra Leone, has lived and died."

Tressignies had not imagined such profound vengeance, which exceeded aught that he had ever read in history. Neither Italy in the sixteenth century nor Corsica at any time — those countries renowned for implacable resentment — offered an example of such a deeply calculated and terrible vengeance as that of this woman, who sacrificed both body and soul to her revenge. He was terrified at its horrible sublimity, for intensity in any passion carried to such a point is sublime. But it is the sublimity of hell.

"And even if he did not know it," she continued again, "I, at least, know it. I know what I do every night — that I drink this filth and find it nectar because it is my revenge. Do I not rejoice every minute at the thought of what I am? Have I not, each time I dishonor this haughty duke, the delirious joy of knowing that I dishonor him? Do I not see clearly in my own mind all that he would if he knew it? Ah, feelings like mine may be insane, but it is their madness that makes their happiness. When I escaped from Sierra Leone, I brought with me the duke's portrait, that I might show this portrait, as though it were himself, the



shameful life I lead! How many times have I said to him, as though he could see and hear me: 'Look! Look!' And when I feel the horror of being in the arms of you men — for I always do feel it; I can never get accustomed to the taste of this filth — I have for a resource this bracelet," and she raised her superb arm with a tragic movement.

"I have this circle of fire which burns me to the marrow and which I keep on my arm, despite the torture of wearing it, that I may never forget Esteban's executioner, that his image may excite my transports — those transports of vengeful hatred that men are stupid enough and conceited enough to believe are due to the pleasures they create in me! I do not know what you are, but you are certainly not the first among all these men; and yet you thought but a moment ago that I was still a human creature, that there was still a fiber of humanity vibrating in me; and yet there was nothing in me but the idea of avenging Esteban on the monster whose portrait is here. Ah! his portrait was for me like the spur, broad as a sword, that the Arab horseman drives into his horse's flank to make it cross the desert.

"I had even a wider expanse of shame to cross, and I buried that abominable portrait in my eyes and in my heart, that I might the better bound under you when you held me. This portrait was as though it were himself, as though he saw us with his painted eyes!

"How well I understand the casting of spells in the centuries when spells were cast! How I should have enjoyed the senseless happiness of planting a dagger in the heart of the image of the man I wished to kill! In those days when I was religious — before I loved Esteban, who took the place of God for me — I needed a crucifix that I might the better think of the Crucified: but if, instead of loving Him, I had hated Him, I would have been an impious wretch had I needed a crucifix that I might the better blaspheme and insult Him.

"Alas!" she added, changing her tone, and passing from the bitterness of the cruelest sentiments to the sweetness of a heartrending melancholy, "I have no portrait of Esteban. I only see him in my mind's eye — and that is, perhaps, fortunate. If he were before my eyes, he would lift up my poor heart; he would make me blush at the unworthy humiliation of my life. I would repent, and then I could no longer avenge him!"

The Gorgon had become tender, but her eyes remained dry. Tresignies, moved by quite another sentiment than those she had excited in him, took her hand and kissed it with a respect mingled with pity. So much misfortune and energy had made her seem great in his eyes. "What a woman!" he thought to himself. "If instead of being the duchess of Sierra Leone, she had been the Marquise de Vasconcellos, she



would, with the purity and warmth of her love for Esteban, have offered to human admiration something akin and equal to the great Marquise de Pescaire. Only," he added to himself, "she would not have shown it, and no one would ever have known the depth and force of her character."

Despite the skepticism of the period and his habit of watching the world only that he might laugh at it, Robert de Tressignies did not feel it absurd for him to kiss the hand of this fallen woman; but he did not know what to say to her. By throwing her story between him and her, she had cut, as though with an axe, those ties that bound them moments ago. He felt an inexpressible mixture of admiration, horror, and scorn; but he would have deemed it very bad taste to have preached sentiment or morality to this woman. He had often laughed at those moralists who had neither warrant nor authority (who proliferated in those days) and who, under the influence of certain dramas or novels, thought it their duty to pick up fallen women as though they were flowerpots that had been knocked over. Sceptic as he was, he was endowed with sufficient good sense to know that only a priest — a priest of God the redeemer — could raise such fallen creatures, and he believed that even a priest would be powerless against this woman's soul. Distress weighed upon his heart, and he preserved a silence that was more embarrassing to him than to her. She, carried away by the violence of her ideas and her memories, continued:

"The idea of dishonoring instead of killing this man, for whom honor — as the world understands it — was more than life, did not occur to me at once. It took a long time before I thought of that. After the death of Vasconcellos, whose presence in the castle was perhaps not known and whose body had probably been thrown into some cell with those of the Negroes who had assassinated him, the duke never addressed a word to me, except briefly and ceremoniously before people, for Caesar's wife should be above suspicion — and I should have remained in the eyes of all, the immaculate Duchess d'Arcos de Sierra Leone. But when alone with me, never a single word or allusion passed; only silence — the silence of hatred that feeds itself and has no need of speech. Don Christoval and I fought each other with the weapons of resolution and pride. I kept back my tears. I am a Turre-Cremata. I have all the potent dissimulation of my race, which is Italian, and I turned to bronze, so that he should not suspect the idea of vengeance smoldering beneath that face of bronze. I was absolutely impenetrable. Thanks to that dissimulation, which closed every opening through which my secret might filter, I prepared my flight from the castle, the walls of which crushed me, and where I could not accomplish my vengeance,



for the duke would have prevented me. I trusted no one. Had any of my duennas or waiting women ever dared to lift their eyes to mine to learn my thoughts?

"At first I thought of going to Madrid; but in Madrid the duke was all-powerful, and the police would have arrested me at once. I would have been sent back to him, and once sent back, I would have been thrown into the *in pace* of some convent and buried there between four walls, out of the world — the world I so needed for my vengeance. Paris was safer. I preferred Paris. It was a better stage for the display of my infamy and my revenge; and because I wanted all of it to explode one day like lightning, what better place than this city, the center of all echoes, and through which all the nations of the world pass! I resolved to live there the life of a prostitute and boldly to descend to the lowest ranks of those fallen women who sell themselves for a piece of money, even to the lowest ruffians.

"I was pious before I knew Esteban, who tore God from my heart to put himself there instead, and often rose in the night to go, without my women, and say my prayers before the dark Virgin in the chapel. It was from there one night that I made my escape and boldly gained the gorges of the Sierras. I carried with me all the jewelry I could, and all the money in my cashbox. I hid myself for some time among the peasants, who conducted me to the border. I came to Paris and fearlessly began this vengeance that is my life. I thirst so for revenge that I have sometimes thought of fascinating some energetic young man and then sending him to the duke to tell him my ignominy, but I have always ended by dismissing that idea, for it is not merely a few feet of filth that I wish to pile on *his* name and my memory — it is a whole pyramid of dung. The later I am avenged, the better I shall be avenged."

She stopped. She had turned from a livid hue to purple. The sweat ran down her forehead, and she became hoarse. Was this the blow of shame? She feverishly seized a water bottle that stood on a side table, poured herself out a large glass, and drained it at a draft.

"It is hard to get used to shame," she said, "but I must get used to it. I have swallowed enough of it during these three months to be used to it."

"Has this lasted three months?" (he did not dare say what) asked Tressignies with a vagueness that was more horrible than precision.

"Yes," she replied, "three months. But what is three months?" she added. "It will take time to cook and recook the dish of vengeance I am preparing for him and which will repay him for refusing me Esteban's heart, which he would not let me eat."



She said this with terrible passion and sadness. Tressignies did not suspect that there could exist in a woman such a mixture of idolatrous love and cruelty. He had never gazed with more concentrated attention on any work of art than he did at this singular and most powerful *artiste* of vengeance who stood before him.

But something that he was astonished to feel, mingled with his contemplation as an observer. He thought he was free from involuntary sensations, but he felt that in the atmosphere of this woman he was breathing a dangerous air. The room, so full of barbaric physical passion, choked the civilization within him. He needed fresh air, and he thought he would go, even if he would return.

She believed that he was about to leave. But there was still one side of her character she had to reveal to him.

"And that?" she said with one of the disdainful gestures of the former duchess, and pointing with her finger to the blue glass cup that he had filled with gold.

"Take back that money," she said. "Who knows? Perhaps I am richer than you. No gold enters here. I accept it from no one." And with the pride of a degradation that was her revenge, she added: "I am only a five-franc girl!"

The sentence was said as it was thought. It was the final stroke of that reversed and infernal sublimity that had been spread before him and that certainly the great Corneille had never imagined in the depths of his tragic soul. The horror of this last sentence gave Tressignies the strength to go away. He emptied the gold out of the cup and left only what she had asked. "Since she wishes it," he said, "I will press upon the dagger she has driven in, and I will add my stain of mud, since it is mud that she requires."

He left, much excited and agitated. The candelabras still shed their flood of light over the common-looking door through which he had passed. He understood now why they had been put there when he looked at the card pasted on the door, the sign of the flesh market. There was written on the card, in large letters:

LA DUCHESSE D'ARCOS  
DE SIERRA LEONE

and underneath was a horrible word, to tell what her trade was.

Tressignies returned home that night, after this adventure, in such a troubled state that he was almost ashamed. Fools — that is to say, nearly everyone — believe that it would be a charming invention if we could



grow young again, but those who know life well know it would be an unprofitable transaction. Tressignies dreaded to think that perhaps he felt too young, and he therefore vowed never to see the duchess again, in spite of the interest, or rather because of the interest, this extraordinary woman created in him.

"Why," he said, "return to that infected place into which a woman of high rank has willfully precipitated herself?"

"She has told me all about her life, and I can easily imagine the horrible details of her present existence, which never change."

Such was the resolution Tressignies made when he was sitting by the fire in the solitude of his own room. For some time he sealed himself off from the world, alone with the impressions and memories of an evening on which his mind could not help but linger, as on a strange and powerful poem, the like of which he had never read either in Byron or Shakespeare, his two favorite poets.

Thus he passed many hours, with his elbow on the arm of his chair, dreamily turning over in his mind the ever-open pages of this hideously powerful poem. It was to him a lotus that made him forget the *salons* of Paris — his country. It required great effort on his part to return there. The irreproachable duchesses he met there seemed colorless.

Though Tressignies was not prudish, or his friends either, he never said a word about his adventure, through a feeling of delicacy which he deemed absurd — for had not the duchess asked him to tell her story to all comers and spread it abroad as much as he could? On the contrary, he kept it to himself. He put it under seal in the most mysterious corner of his soul, as you stop a bottle of very rare perfume, which loses something of its scent each time you smell it. Considering what sort of man he was, it was astonishing that neither at the Café de Paris, nor the club, nor in the orchestra at the theater, nor anywhere else where men find themselves alone and tell each other everything, did he approach any of his friends without being afraid to hear his own adventure told; and he trembled during the first ten minutes of a conversation lest that chance should arrive.

Nevertheless, he kept his word and revisited neither the Rue Basse du Rempart nor the boulevard. He no longer leaned, like the yellow-gloved dandies of his day, against the balcony at Tortoni's. "If I were to see that confounded yellow dress flaunting before me," he said to himself, "I should perhaps be fool enough to follow her again."

Every yellow dress caught his attention; indeed he loved yellow dresses now, though he had always detested them. "She has spoiled my taste," he said; thus did the dandy in him make fun of the man. But



what Mme de Staël, who knew them, calls "the Devil's thoughts" were stronger than the man or the dandy. Tressignies became moody. He had been lively in society and well known for his gaiety. His spirits were gone. "Is he in love?" the gossips asked. The old Marquise de Clérembault, who thought that Tressignies was in love with her granddaughter, then just fresh from the *Sacré Coeur* and romantic, as people were then, said to him crossly: "I cannot bear you when you put on those Hamlet airs." First he was sad and then he became ill. His complexion grew leaden. "What is the matter with Monsieur de Tressignies?" they asked, and perhaps they would have discovered that he had a stomach cancer like Bonaparte's in his heart. But one fine day he put an end to all questions and inquiries concerning him, by packing up his trunk and disappearing as suddenly as though he had fallen down a hole.

Where had he gone? What was he doing? He was away more than a year, and then he returned to Paris and took his usual place in society. One night he was at the Spanish embassy, where all the best society in Paris had congregated. It was late. Supper had been announced, and the *salons* had emptied, everyone crowding around the buffet. In the card room a few men were lingering over a game of whist. All at once Tressignies's partner, who was turning over the pages of a little tortoiseshell notebook in which he wrote down the bets that were made over each rubber, saw something that made him say "Ah!" — as a man does when he finds something he has forgotten.

"May I ask your Excellency," he said, addressing the Spanish ambassador, who was standing with his hands behind his back, watching the game, "if there are any of the Sierra Leone family still in Madrid?"

"Certainly there are," replied the ambassador. "First of all, there is the duke, who is the peer of the highest *grandees* in the realm."

"Who, then, is this duchess of Sierra Leone who has just died in Paris — and what relation is she to the duke?" continued the questioner.

"That must be his wife," the ambassador quietly replied. "But for nearly two years the duchess has been looked upon as dead. She disappeared; and no one knew why or how she disappeared. It has always been a profound mystery. You must know that the splendid Duchess d'Arcos de Sierra Leone was not like a woman of the present day — one of those silly girls that any lover can carry off. She was quite as haughty as the duke, her husband, who is certainly the proudest of the *ricos hombres* of all Spain. Moreover, she was pious — of an almost monastic piety. She lived always at Sierra Leone, a desert of red marble, where the eagles, if there are any there, must die of boredom among the peaks. One day she disappeared, and no one has ever found a trace of her. Since



that time, the duke — a man of the time of Charles V and to whom no one has ever dared to put the least question — has lived in Madrid and has never said any more about his wife and her disappearance, as though she had never existed. She was, like her name, a burned tower — the last of the Turre-Crematas of the Italian branch of the family.”

“Exactly,” interrupted the player, and he looked at the page of his notebook. “Well, then,” he added solemnly, “I have the honor to inform your Excellency that the duchess of Sierra Leone was buried this morning and — what you would assuredly never suspect — she was buried at the church of the Salpêtrière, of which hospital she was an inmate.”

At these words, the players laid their cards down on the table and gazed at the speaker in amazement.

“Yes,” said the player, who saw he was having an effect — a thing so delightful to every Frenchman. “I was passing by there this morning, and I heard such beautiful sacred music that I entered the church — such events being rare there — and I nearly tumbled backward when I passed the portal, which was draped with black, in the center of which was a coat of arms with many quarterings, to see in the choir the most magnificent catafalque. The church was almost empty. There were a few beggars in the poor seats, and one or two women — some of those horrible lepers from the hospital near by, the ones who are not completely insane and can still stand. Surprised at seeing such an assemblage around such a catafalque, I approached and read this inscription, which was written in large silver letters on a black background and which so astonished me that I copied it so as not to forget it:

“HERE LIES  
SANZIA FLORINDA CONCEPTION  
DE TURRE-CREMATA  
DUCHESS D'ARCOS DE SIERRA LEONE,  
A REPENTANT PROSTITUTE,  
DIED AT THE SALPÊTRIÈRE THE ———, 18—  
REQUIESCAT IN PACE.”

The players thought no more about the game. As for the ambassador, although a diplomat ought no more to show surprise than an officer ought to show fear, he felt that his astonishment might compromise him in the eyes of his guests.

“And you asked for no information?” he said, as though he had been speaking to one of his inferiors.

“No, your Excellency,” replied the player. “There were only a few



poor people there; and the priests, who perhaps might have informed me, were chanting the mass. Besides, I remembered that I would have the honor of seeing you this evening."

"I will have the information tomorrow," said the ambassador.

The game finished but was broken by so many exclamations and everyone was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that even the best whist players made mistakes and no one perceived that Tressignies had turned pale, seized his hat, and departed suddenly, without taking leave of anyone.

The next morning he was at the Salpêtrière early. He questioned the chaplain, a good old priest, who gave him all the information he asked concerning "No. 119," otherwise the duchess of Sierra Leone. The wretched woman had ended as she had foreseen she would end. At the terrible game she had played, she had gained a most frightful disease. "In a few months," said the old priest, "she was rotten to the bones. One of her eyes had popped out of its socket one day and landed at her feet like a big coin... The other liquefied... She died — stoically — in intolerable sufferings. She was still rich and had bequeathed her money and jewels to the other patients in the hospital who were sick like her, and she had ordered a grand funeral.

"Only, to punish herself for her disorderly life," said the old priest, who knew nothing about this woman's life, "she insisted in her penitence and humility, that it should be put after her titles, both on her coffin and on her tomb, that she was a repentant prostitute.

"And even," added the old chaplain, who had been deceived by her confession, "so great was her humility that she did not wish the word 'repentant' to be written."

Tressignies smiled bitterly, but he took care not to undeceive the kind old priest.

For he knew that she had not repented, and that this touching humility was still, after her death, revenge.

Originally published as *Les Diaboliques* (1874).







# **Monsieur Vénus**

by Rachilde

---

Translated by Madeleine Boyd

Introduction

by Janet Beizer



# Venus in Drag, or Redressing the Discourse of Hysteria: Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*

by Janet Beizer

In his 1889 preface to the second edition of *Monsieur Vénus*, Maurice Barrès described the novel as “the spectacle of unusual perversity.”<sup>1</sup> In 1986, Bram Dijkstra calls *Monsieur Vénus* “a role-reversal novel . . . an early example of the unthreatening reversal games [characteristic of] the past century.”<sup>2</sup> In the time separating these two writers, *Monsieur Vénus* loses its shock value: the rare spectacle becomes only another round in an innocuous series of games. This is not terribly surprising; one might expect that a century's difference would bring in tow a reading difference. More remarkable than the change is the continuity: both appraisals of Rachilde's novel emphasize a turnabout. Charged with “perverting” or “reversing” convention, the novel is locked in a structure whose binarity we know to be dependent on unitary dominance. I want to argue that *Monsieur Vénus* embodies much less a reversal than a *dispersal* of convention — a more radical placing in question than can be accommodated by the inversion figure.

First a concession: anyone familiar with the plot — or even attentive to the oxymoronic title — of the novel might initially be tempted to read binary logic as its natural order and inversion as its prime mover. *Monsieur Vénus* tells of a young aristocratic woman, an amateur artist named Raoule de Vénérande, who meets Jacques Silvert (called “Jaja”), a young male flower maker, and is ravished by his beauty. She sets him up as her mistress in an elegantly appointed apartment and outfits him in lavish, flowing fabrics. The text is punctuated by a series of trysts featuring cross-dressing, sadomasochistic scenes in which Raoule plays aggressor to Jacques's victim, and violent sexual rivalries that circulate among Raoule, Jacques, and a supporting cast of her soldier suitor and his prostitute sister. The four are pitted against each other in kaleidoscoping patterns of homo- and heterosexual desire that climax in the sacrifice of Jacques to Raoule's jealousy after his attempted infidelity with the soldier. Raoule's final trysts are with death — or, more accurately, with its effigy. We find her, dressed now as a woman,



now as a man, in a sumptuous bedchamber, clasping a wax cast of Jacques's body.

This plot summary is indicative of a masculine/feminine turnabout that affects clothing, profession, temperament, gender pronouns and inflections, social, financial, and sexual positions — not to mention power. My reluctance, however, to privilege inversion as master trope of this novel has nothing to do with denying its operation; it has everything to do with recognizing the contexts within which it operates, both extra- and intratextually — contexts that complicate and destabilize. This means considering, on the one hand, how figures of reversal in the text are related to contemporary reading conventions, and, on the other, how they function within the tissue of Rachilde's writing. We have initial access to both domains — and a means of mediating between them — in the form of Barrès's preface, written five years after the novel's original publication.

Much like an author's own preface, this one is an instrument of the text: it serves to direct our reading. However, if, like any threshold, it leads inside, it also opens onto the outside. It is a mirror held up to the book, but one that is always two-sided, and also reflects the reading public: its beliefs, its desires, its fears, its patterns of reception. I am suggesting that we read the preface to *Monsieur Vénus* — much as Dominick LaCapra reads the trial of *Madame Bovary* — as “an index of conventions or norms of reading in the larger public.”<sup>3</sup> As Barrès takes on the role of “defense attorney” for the novel (which was never literally brought to trial but was banned shortly after its 1884 publication in Belgium), his argument, anticipating its audience, is necessarily saturated with fin-de-siècle conventions of interpretation. The preface reads the novel, but it reads double. At the same time, the novel reads the preface. *Monsieur Vénus* may in fact best (and only apparently anachronistically) be understood as a deconstructive reading of its own preface, for it responds to and unsettles the ideologically grounded conventions of interpretation reproduced by the preface.

In what follows I will situate myself on the unsteady prefatorial threshold between *Monsieur Vénus* and its nineteenth-century public, crossing over and back in both directions. My stance mimes the opening scene of the novel, which places Raoule de Vénérande in a similarly problematic threshold position: “Then, as the key was in the door, she entered, but the smell of apples cooking caught in her throat and stopped her short upon the threshold” (p. 274). Raoule enters, but is stopped short. She is on the doorsill — and so not yet inside — yet is enveloped by the odor that surrounds her. Even as this sentence draws



our attention to the threshold — the dividing line — it blurs the distinction between outside and inside. The evident problematizing of spatial borders is compounded by an interrogation of other boundaries: most notably, gender difference, class distinction, and textual limits. Expecting that the flower maker Marie Silvert will be a woman, Raoule asks Jacques, "Am I mistaken, Monsieur?" — to which he replies, "For the time being, I am Marie Silvert" (p. 275). As she stands at the threshold, Raoule suggests crossing the barrier segregating the aristocracy from the people. And finally, as the reader, with Raoule, enters the text, the liminal status of the opening lines is obscured by a sign of extratextual intrusion into the text. This quite material sign ("*Marie Silvert, flower maker, designer*"), rendered in the text by italics, is the inaugural instance of a practice that will gradually become pervasive. The italics signal a discourse that is both inside and outside the text: a discourse whose mere presence speaks its assimilation, yet whose typographic difference distances, marks a foreign provenance. I will return to this below.

In his preface Barrès admits no such zone of shadow, no such threshold site of fusion and confusion. He quite simply offers a privileged means of access to Rachilde. I do not mean to use the woman here in place of her work, although one could say that it is precisely such a metonymic slide, albeit reversed, that regulates Barrès's approach to a novel that is for him irrevocably — and salaciously — conflated with the woman who wrote it. "Rachilde has done nothing but tell her own story," says Barrès. "Her book is the prolongation of her life" (pp. 270, 272). His introduction to the novel quickly becomes the exhibition of a child-woman whose rather equivocal wares he is trying to sell. He promises that the reading of *Monsieur Vénus* will climax in a "violent emotion" (p. 269) whose force builds from the traits he ascribes to its author: her youth, her innocence, her ignorance, her perversity, her hysteria.

Barrès creates a woman-text whose appeal is based on the superimposition of three phantasmatic faces of woman: the hysteric, the slut, and the polymorphously perverted nymphet. Rachilde, says Barrès, authors a "feverishly written" novel (p. 270) that he more specifically attributes to the "deformities of love, which the *maladie du siècle* has produced in the soul of a young woman" (p. 271). But it is the image of Rachilde as seductive girl-child that is most alluring to Barrès. This Gallic Humbert Humbert reflects at length and with evident relish on "young girls [who] are governed only by their instincts, being small animals, tricky, selfish, and passionate" (p. 270). He savors every refer-



ence to Rachilde's excessive ignorance (the epistemological reinforced by the sexual), and he takes particular delight in identifying innocence as paradoxical source of her rather more knowing novel, marveling at "the refinements of vice, bursting from the dreams of a virgin" (p. 269).

Barrès's persistent emphasis on Rachilde's paired ignorance and innocence finally calls attention to itself, letting us suppose that knowledge's vacuum is more precisely an evacuation of knowledge: process rather than essence. The calculated production of what we might call an "ignorance effect" — a salable image of sensual and intellectual deprivation — merits further scrutiny, less in tribute to Barrès's insistence than in recognition of the marketing strategies in which it is grounded.<sup>4</sup>

In his effort to promote *Monsieur Vénus*, to explain why the novel is a masterpiece,<sup>5</sup> Barrès repeatedly invokes Rachilde's tender age and sex: "The nicety of the perverseness of this book lies in the fact that it was written by a young girl of twenty. A marvelous masterpiece . . . is the work of . . . the sweetest and most retiring child!" (p. 269). The repeated references to her puerility, chastity, and wholesome upbringing signify sexual purity, which is in turn the signifier of ignorance: Rachilde has "eyes that ignore everything" and "the ignorance of a virgin" (pp. 270, 271). The degree to which sexual inexperience (itself already a specious assumption) is generalized as ignorance *tout court* is surprising; more curious is the conclusion that Rachilde's (presumed) innocence disqualifies her intellectual capacity to write *Monsieur Vénus*. "Of course," the prefacer assures us, "the little girl who wrote this marvelous *Monsieur Vénus* did not have such aesthetics . . . in her head. . . . She simply had bad instincts" (p. 270). He elaborates: "At twenty Rachilde wrote a book that amazed everybody, and wrote it with scarcely any reflection; she wrote easily, following her instincts" (p. 270).

The logical extension of Barrès's argument is that *Monsieur Vénus*, a novel born of the coupling of innocence and ignorance, should have spontaneously aborted; innocence and its incestuous bedfellow, ignorance, should breed only the blank page. But — by intervention of the new godhead, pathology — the marriage of feminine innocence and ignorance engenders (by immaculate conception) vicious knowledge.

The lesson Barrès teaches is that *Monsieur Vénus*, a novel that draws from his pen such adjectives as "daring, vulgar, impure," is written not with the head but with the (female) instincts. To write her knowing novel, Rachilde had no need to know (i.e., to have experienced or to understand) what she wrote; she simply gave free rein to her nerves,



unleashed her instincts and feelings: "To such writers, the novel is only a means of expressing that emotion that the humdrum of life obliges one to repress, or at least to conceal" (p. 272). Barrès is invoking a kind of "blood knowledge" of vice, a "natural viciousness" carried by the female of the species.

We need not waste time pondering the inconsistencies evident in this portrait of the young woman artist as cretin. The contradictions inherent in Barrès's presentation of *Monsieur Vénus* as virginal fantasy, on the one hand, and sordid "autobiography of the most peculiar of young women" (pp. 00–00), on the other, cannot be rationally resolved; it can only be understood as inscriptions of the more global nineteenth-century discourse about sex that Michel Foucault calls "sexuality."<sup>6</sup> Barrès's comments on Rachilde (on the novel as woman) constitute a virtual mapping of the power/knowledge apparatus Foucault calls the "hystericization of the female body": a three-pronged strategy by which woman's body is equated with sexuality, appropriated by pathology, and identified with the social body (which I take to mean language, among other things).<sup>7</sup> Barrès's perceptions about *Monsieur Vénus* have little to do with the novel and much to do with the grid he imposes on it, a grid already in place that organizes his reading. As Leo Bersani has observed in reference to another phantasmatic context (the representation of AIDS), "The messages most likely to reach their destination are messages already there."<sup>8</sup>

Barrès's reading strategy, by analogy with what Foucault names a "power/knowledge strategy," can be described as the hystericization of the textual body: the preface reads the text by applying to it a grid whose essential components are, as we have seen, hypersexuality, pathology, and bourgeois family values. We might suppose that the preface was intended to trigger a parallel reading strategy in its public. However, the very production of this preface is evidence that such a strategy was already in place and did not need to be paratextually activated. In a sense, then, this threshold text is self-effacing. As it would mark off the contours of the text, it shades into indistinction, blurring the border — becoming the blurred border — between reader and text. As it would guide the reader to the text, it cannot help but reveal that the reader is already in the text and the text preinscribed in the reader.

The conflation of a text's writing and its reception, the collapsing of limits between inner and outer textual space, the implosion of the extratextual into the text: these are the occult forces of Barrès's preface that Rachilde takes on as her subject. *Monsieur Vénus* is about the male colonization of female textuality and of woman *as* textuality: it



is a novel that parodies its own reception and writes the intrusive reader into its text. This internalization of a predicted response — Rachilde's quite literal *inspiration* — is nowhere clearer than in her liberal use of italics.

Appearing on the first page and then with gathering force as the novel advances, the italicization of words and phrases typographically formalizes the Otherness of a discourse whose source is given as external to the text.<sup>9</sup> Surging forth in the midst of a text dominated by roman type, italic characters introduce not only another, *different discourse*, but also the very idea of *differentiation*, the splitting off that creates difference. Within the italicized discourse, dominating it, is a subdiscourse on gender, itself the paradigmatic marker of difference: roughly half the italicized forms represent gender pronouns, gender-inflected nouns, adjectives, verbs, and gender-specific terms (such as *Mademoiselle*, *nephew*, and *mistress*).

The gendering of italics presents a *mise en abyme* of the production of difference: a demarcation of demarcation whose overemphasis calls into question the possibility of ever telling what the difference is. When Jacques is designated by the italicized pronoun *he* or Raoule by the adverb *womanly*, the italics call in question the linguistic code or convention that assigns gender. But when, alternatively, Jacques is referred to by an italicized feminine pronoun (*she*, *her*) or when Raoule's discourse is marked by italicized masculine endings ("I am a *jealous* [*jaloux*] man!" she roared" [p. 308]), the italics become part of a multilayered linguistic cross-dressing that is difficult to interpret. What is being challenged in these examples is not so much convention as the text's interrogation of convention. The italicization of forms that might otherwise appear to be offered as inverted revisions of linguistic conventions suggests the rejection of a simple reversal mechanism. At stake is less any particular sign or signs than the process of referentiality, especially as based on a sexually determinable notion of difference. In the italicized moment at which the "he" of Jacques is recoded as *she*, there is a flicker of uncertainty, a shadow of irony cast on the apparently transparent connection linking gender with people and language. The demarcation of the text's remarkings of gender alienates the narrative voice, destabilizes its authority, suggesting a fundamental indistinguishability of self and other, inside and outside, originality and citation, sincerity and irony.

Such an interrogation of differentiation traverses *Monsieur Vénus*, even when gender is not specifically at issue, even when italics are not present to heighten our perception of it. The text's irony is not pro-



duced by italics alone: they serve merely to emphasize a distancing effect that is otherwise present, spun into a tissue of ironized though unitalicized commonplaces about hysteria, sexuality, masculinity, femininity, and art. As we see the text integrate its italicized Other (offering no designation of discursive source) and, conversely, as we hear the narrative voice speak in Other (but not always italicized) tongues, it becomes apparent that the entire novel is a caricatural citation of fin-de-siècle stereotypes. In other words — words I paraphrase from some comments Ross Chambers has made on *Madame Bovary* — to the extent that this text is indistinguishable from its social matrix, a competent reader will put the *entire novel* in quotes and engage in a sentence-by-sentence ironic reading.<sup>10</sup>

But Rachilde is no Flaubert. Why then attribute to her the awareness of a Flaubert rather than that of a Bouvard or a Pécuchet? What if her relentless repetition of the social discourse of her time is not a sign of resistance, but of compliance? Why assume Rachilde is society's gadfly rather than its scribe?

These are extremely sticky questions that I cannot definitively resolve, partly because I think it likely that they do not have absolute answers. Without ruling out complicity, however, I want to make a provisional argument for contestation: for a series of formal strategies that, brought to bear on citation, create an ironic field that ultimately turns repetition into difference. Operating singly or, more often, in combination, these strategies include but extend beyond italicization, embracing other attributed forms of quotation (direct and indirect), as well as the stylistic alteration, exaggeration, reversal, and sheer accumulation of cliché locutions or topoi.

As we explore the citational structure of *Monsieur Vénus*, the functioning of the strategic mechanisms that both shape and re-form it will emerge. We will also be able to identify the discourse cited — the social discourse — as more specifically the discourse of hystericization, and we will hear in Rachilde's citations of it strong echoes of Barrès's preface that would be written five years later. For purely organizational purposes, my discussion of this discourse will be divided into the following categories: gender/power roles, gender reversal, clinical hysteria, heredity, and the semiotic body. These rubrics correspond to somewhat arbitrary divisions of an essentially continuous discourse; in fact, the categories overlap at many points.

Threaded through the novel are a series of gender-related topoi only too familiar to readers of nineteenth-century novels. The flower maker turned courtesan Jacques Silvert is a citation of an *idée reçue*



that equates this occupation with loose morals and prostitution.<sup>11</sup> Jacques's carriage rides through the Bois with Raoule de Vénérande also repeat a convention, *l'heure du Bois*, whose formulae are also closely adhered to: Jacques, the beautiful lower-class consort, discreetly hidden in the back of the carriage so as to see without being seen, is given an introduction to society by Raoule, who points out the principal players on that stage and recounts what goes on behind the scenes. Jacques's fearful intuition, in the face of the moneyed, well-born travelers of the Bois, that he will one day be abandoned when his rich, aristocratic lover takes a spouse from among her own, is also a citation from a familiar gender code that dichotomizes mistress and wife: "Ah!" he would often say, cuddling up to her, frightened, 'some day you'll marry and you'll leave me!'" (p. 313)

It is of far greater importance, in the preceding examples, that we recognize citations from a dominant gender code in Rachilde's discourse than that we insist on the (evident) fact that the conventional gender positions are reversed in her versions of that code. Gender inversion in these and many other cases is a strategic technique used to emphasize, by defamiliarizing, the inverted conventions, conventions that might otherwise pass as natural.

Even such a preliminary review of inverted citation in *Monsieur Venus* should suggest that reversal is not, as has been claimed, the dominant figure in this novel; only one among a number of ironizing strategies, it is subordinate to the regime of repetition, as are others I will consider. It is precisely, if paradoxically, because reversal is in the service of repetition (so as to ensure, alongside its companion strategies, a dizzying proliferation of citations) that it gains a subversive power rather than remain a mere dependent (and thus conservative) form of social discourse.

Reversal plays a double role in this novel, for it is not only a formal strategy bearing on citation but itself a citation as well; one more cliché mobilized from the fin-de-siècle reserve. In fact, Mario Praz has long since convinced us that reversal — more precisely, gender reversal — is a pervasive nineteenth-century literary commonplace that returns in ever-changing garb.<sup>12</sup> In passing, we should invoke the feminized romantic hero, the androgyne, the femme fatale; more specifically (but not exhaustively) we might mention René, Mlle de Maupin, Séraphita/Séraphitus, Mathilde de la Mole, Emma Bovary, Foedora, and La Zambinella.

So when Rachilde puts Jacques into a woman's nightgown (p. 296) or gives him thighs that are "round enough to make his sex uncertain"



(pp. 280–89), or when she dresses Raoule in an “almost masculine costume” (p. 287) or equips her with “weapons of all kinds and of all countries” (p. 280), the commanding mode is citation. In other words, we must think *gender reversal* primarily as a unit, as a compound convention cited by Rachilde. Admittedly, the distinction between gender reversal used, on the one hand, in complicity with convention and, on the other, as a defamiliarizing strategy, is not always clear-cut. When, for example, Raoule imperiously cries to Jacques, “Am I master, yes or no?” (p. 310), or when she warns him, “You must feel . . . that I am the better man of the two!” (p. 308), the effect of the cliché of gender/power inversion is ambiguous. “Master” and “man” could here be understood as nominal power shifters, as metaphors shifting power from man to woman without, however, changing the phallogentric power base. Or they could be understood as unsettling gender conventions, if we emphasize the fact that a conventional gender/power identification is being cited *in a different voice*; by regendering the citing voice, the convention by which mastery and masculinity are thought together is denaturalized. We cannot choose.

We might imagine *Monsieur Vénus* organized along two principal axes: the axis of citation and the axis of formal strategies. The point at which the two axes intersect is reversal. At this site of convergence, reversal folds over on itself (i.e., on gender reversal), doubles, becomes something akin to a double negative. Although in theory we would expect (gender) reversal reversed to yield a positive value, a confirmation of convention, this doubling is in effect an alert: it unsettles and confuses the reader, highlighting and destabilizing the cited discourse of gender. Examples abound; the following are particularly clear.

Raoule, *in full male attire* and acting the role of a man seducing his virgin bride, is making love to Jacques. At the height of passion, however, she bares her breast (“to feel the beating of Jacques’s heart better” [p. 354]), and destroys the fiction, that is, reverses the citation of gender reversal: “‘Raoule,’ cried Jacques, his face distorted . . . ‘Raoule, aren’t you a man? Can’t you be a man?’ And the sob of lost illusions, forever dead, came from the innermost part of his being” (p. 354). This is a case of double-cross-dressing: Jacques is betrayed when Raoule, in drag, returns to a female identity, and the reader’s expectations are tricked when Raoule’s undressing redresses the gender-reversal cliché. Language, moreover, changes gender in this novel as easily as Raoule and Jacques change clothes. In the quotation “‘I am a *jealous* [*jaloux*] man!’ she roared” (p. 308), the female speaker (Raoule) adopts the masculine form of the adjective, only to revert to a female identity,



exposed (like Raoule's breast) in the feminine pronoun and in the following feminine-inflected adjective.<sup>13</sup> The accumulation of such grammatical hermaphrodites is disconcerting; Raittolbe might be speaking for the reader when he pleads: "Let us come to an understanding! . . . [L]et's stick to either *he* or *she* so that I won't lose the few shreds of common sense I have left" (p. 305).<sup>14</sup>

Rachilde's appropriation of gender conventions continues, the irony building as commonplaces of gender slide into stereotypes of hysteria, passing by way of clichés about femininity. Chided by Raittolbe for rearranging a planned meeting, Raoule cites all the obvious explanations before he has the opportunity to propose any one of them: "As I am a woman nothing ought to astonish you," Raoule answered, laughing nervously. "I do the opposite of what I promised. What can be more natural than that?" (p. 300). Implicit in this overdetermined response is a string of clichés about femininity: woman does not conform to reason, woman is unpredictable, woman is mobile and capricious, woman is natural, woman is prisoner of her nerves. It is the stockpiling of citation, the overdetermination, that is here responsible for the ironic texture.

Raoule's presence in the novel, the coherence (such as it is) of her character, is due to the expansion and development of this citational network. Everywhere we hear repeated the litany of cliché characteristics (animal-like, sneaky, ardent, perverse, instinctual, nervous, pathological) that structured Barrès's discourse on women. Raoule, constantly prey to her nerves, is aroused by Jacques's beauty: "her nervous hands clutched the sheets; she was growling, as panthers do" (p. 289). Hysteria rears its lustful head, and Barrès's ardent beast is roused once more. Or again: "Raoule arose, a nervous tremor shook her all over" (p. 277). Jacques is once again the agent provocateur. When Raoule lingers in his small, poorly ventilated apartment, her nervous condition is aggravated: "Her nerves were overexcited by the suffocating atmosphere of the garret" (p. 278). This citation is one of a series that lets us hear the clinical along with the popular discourse of hysteria, for it was standard, in treatises on hysteria of the period, to warn of the pernicious effect of fetid odors and noxious air. Of course, as I discuss elsewhere, scientific and popular discourses have a common ideological bedrock, so that any attempt to locate the source of citation in a given discourse must be arbitrary.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, there are intermittent echoes in the text of the most recent clinical cant about the disease (a cant that, given the vogue hysteria enjoyed at the time, was rapidly assimilated by the intelligent-



sia): that of Charcot and his group at the Salpêtrière. Raoule in her coupé abandons herself to a state of nervous exhilaration: "her head thrown back, her breasts heaving, her arms clasped. From time to time she gave a sigh of lassitude" (p. 279). This pose reproduces an *arc de cercle* or, the spasmodic muscle contracture known as opisthotonus, the bowed-back body position Charcot made famous when he standardized the hysterical attack into four largely invariable phases which he then subdivided into attitudes and movements. The *arc de cercle* was located in the second major phase, known as the "clown" phase. The opisthotonus associated with hysteria bears a marked resemblance to the attitude of a body in the throes of passion. As Bram Dijkstra has recently pointed out, this convulsive woman (whom he designates by the unfortunate epithet "the Nymph with the Broken Back") becomes a fin-de-siècle topos of painting.<sup>16</sup>

Rachilde cites the Salpêtrière once again in a rather long-winded paraphrase of "retrospective medicine," the practice, widely indulged in by the Charcot circle, of reinterpreting history and art of the past (usually representations of demonic possessions) according to current medical tenets, that is, recuperating the spiritual in the name of the scientific — specifically, in the name of the hysteric.<sup>17</sup> Rachilde borrows the discourse of retrospective medicine and uses it periphrastically to announce her heroine's capricious decision to marry that plebeian object of her desire, Jacques Silvert: "Raoule, as mad as those people of the Middle Ages who were possessed of devils and were no longer responsible for their actions" (p. 343). To the ears of any *initié* of the period, this citation immediately translates as "hysterical." The extension of the more quotidian epithet into an unwieldy periphrasis flaunts its citational nature; the phrase appears borrowed, out of place, drawn from a specialized discursive register.

This other register — that of the medical discourse of hysteria — makes one explicit, directly quoted foray into *Monsieur Vénus*. Near the beginning of the novel, Rachilde, like any qualified clinical practitioner of the era, supplies the etiology of Raoule's malady:

One day, Raoule, rummaging in the garrets of the mansion, discovered a book that she read by chance. Her eyes encountered an engraving, she turned away, but she took the book with her. About that time a revolution was taking place in Raoule. Her expression changed, her words became brief, her eyes became feverish, she laughed and cried at the same time. [Her aunt] grew uneasy and, fearing a serious illness, called the doctors (p. 282).



Like Emma Bovary before her, Raoule catches novelsickness. The *cause morale* as well as the symptoms of her hysteria follow the textbook pattern, conforming to the spirit of S.-A.-D. Tissot's much-cited phrase, still authoritative in Charcot's day: "If your daughter reads novels at fifteen [twelve/ten] years of age, she will have the vapors at twenty [eighteen/fifteen]."<sup>18</sup> The doctor's prognosis and recommendation for treatment also comply with decades of professional and folk wisdom, which finds hysterics, nymphomaniacs, and whores closely related. Although the Charcot circle officially denied the commonplace association between hysteria and lust, their pronouncements often implicitly corroborated the age-old comparison.<sup>19</sup> Raoule's doctor, however, says aloud and in caricatural terms what his real-world Salpêtrière confreres for the most part dared only whisper:

"A very special case. A few years more, and that pretty creature whom you love too much, I think, will, without ever loving them, have known as many men as there are beads on her aunt's rosary. No happy medium! Either a nun or a monster! God's bosom or sensual passions! It would, perhaps, be better to put her in a convent, since we put hysterical women in the Salpêtrière!" (p. 282).

There is a double postulation at work here: all the while equating hysteria and female eroticism, the doctor is comparing hysteria and nunhood, at first, it might seem, in a dichotomous way, but ultimately, as convergent phenomena, religious life being a sublimated but parallel form of female eccentricity. While the doctor prescribes the convent and chastity, Aunt Elizabeth's confessor, representing the other side of the nineteenth-century debate, suggests the "true" (and truly atavistic) remedy: "Marry her" (p. 282). The two sides of the debate are clearly invoked here. On the one hand, hysteria is causally related to lubricity and/or sexual indulgence, and therefore prostitutes are more, and nuns less, inclined to the ailment than other women: chastity is a prophylactic or cure. On the other hand, hysteria is causally related to chastity and/or sexual continence, and nuns are therefore more, and prostitutes less, inclined to the malady than other women: sex is the best medicine. The juxtaposition of these conflicting theories is mutually corrosive.

Hystericizing discourse is most explicitly demystified, however, in a sentence of ambiguous origin. We find Raoule's soldier suitor, Raittolbe, frustrated by her attentions toward the young flower maker, "swearing to himself that he would never come back to that hysterical



woman. In his opinion anyone who did not follow ordinary rules must be a hysteric" (p. 293). Although this phrase takes the form of indirect discourse, the speaker is the narrator's puppet; the concept that hysteria is defined by individuality, and thus by marginality, demonstrates a lucidity, a self-consciousness that we know to be beyond Raittolbe (he is not a strong enough vessel for this thought). A gaping disproportion yawns between the expressed idea that hysteria may have as much to do with diagnosis as with symptoms and Raittolbe's capacity to have (much less express) such an idea; this space is inhabited by narrative consciousness alone.

Rachilde's novel records not only stereotypical hysteria but also its inscription within the larger discourse of pathological genealogy. The presentation of Rachilde's hysteric follows the same protocol as any clinical grand rounds of the period, which begin to describe the patient by reconstructing a degenerative genealogy, a pathological heredity to which his or her condition can be ascribed. It is not unusual to find, in the observations section that appears in most treatises, accounts such as the following:

Mother is hysterical without attacks; father is sickly, stricken with gastralgia for the past twenty-five years. There is a healthy brother, another gastralgic brother, a hysterical sister without attacks.<sup>20</sup>

— *Father*, . . . sober, subject to cephalalgia; convalescing from pleuresy. [*His father* probably was paralyzed. — No other nervous disorder in the family.] *Mother* . . . healthy . . . had *migraines* when young . . . [*Father* . . . excessive drinking . . . *Mother*, good health.]<sup>21</sup>

His father . . . is an alcoholic. His mother, dead from tuberculosis, had *hysterical attacks*. Finally, his family reveals a maternal grandmother also hysterical, although she lived to 82, and *two maternal aunts* who were hysterical as well. Such antecedents are of capital importance, four hysterics and an alcoholic in the same family!<sup>22</sup>

As Charcot astutely noted (and fervently believed), "the fatality of antiquity is replaced today by the fatality of heredity."<sup>23</sup> Heredity becomes destiny in the late nineteenth century, and the branches of the family tree twist and turn, for it is a tree of degeneration, a schematic rendering of the generational transmission of vice: evil metamorphosed as pathology. Moreau de Tours's "tree of nervosity," a graphic representation whose branches show hysteria, epilepsy, prosti-



tution, alcoholism, and criminality to be closely related phenomena, is one of the best mappings the fin de siècle has left us of its phantasms. Moreau's tree can be supplemented by two other essential artifacts: Morel's myth of degeneration and Déjerine's genealogical tables. Morel postulates the inheritance, over the course of four generations, of a carefully predicted, evolving series of abnormalities originating in the founding generation's exposure to intoxicating agents (alcohol, poor diet, crowded living conditions, etc.). Déjerine's seventy "*genealogical tableaux*" trace the congenital sources of different forms of marginality (e.g., "heritage of murder," "heritage of madness," "heritage of debauchery," to name a small sampling).<sup>24</sup> All of these myths were of course taken up and elaborated by Zola, who personified every leaf on the tree of degeneration in his five-generation *Rougon-Macquart* cycle.

Rachilde repeats her lessons well; she has them indirectly repeated by Raoule, who, as a woman of the times, shields her madness behind the following "lucid explanation": "Her father had been one of those worn-out debauchés who blush at the work of the Marquis de Sade, but not from prudery. Her mother . . . had had the most natural and violent appetite" (p. 282).<sup>25</sup> Jacques, too, can do nothing but play out the fate dealt him by his heredity: "He was the son of a drunkard and a whore. His honor could only weep" (p. 290). Like Raoule, he is aware that his fate is indelibly inscribed in his blood, and he accepts as inevitable the consanguinity of vice, which he holds wholly responsible for his leaving Raoule's embrace to offer himself to her suitor: "And it was not his fault! . . . Prostitution is a disease! They all had had it in his family: his mother, his sister; could he struggle against his own blood?" (p. 364) Using Raoule and Jacques as mouthpiece, Rachilde is quoting the spirit, if not the letter, of two lines from the *Oresteia* (*The Eumenides*, 2.5) — a citation that Charcot facetiously placed in the mouths of two of his more pitiable hysterics, "two sad creatures . . . degenerates, unbalanced creatures, intellectually and morally feeble":

What have we done, oh Zeus, to deserve this fate?  
Our fathers failed: but what have *we* done?<sup>26</sup>

The quotation, twice removed from its source when it appears in *Monsieur Vénus*, is further distanced by Rachilde's couching it in indirect and free indirect discourse; not attributable to any specific voice, it appears and reappears in her text as the voice of repetition: cliché, *idée reçue*, *bêtise*.



We have so far considered, through Rachilde's mimicry of them, only those topoi (gender, power, the clinic, and heredity) through which the discourse of hysteria wields its marginalizing, disempowering effect. Rachilde's manipulation of a final (and only artificially separate) topos, which I will call the semiotic body, traces the process by which the *disabling* of the hystericized body paradoxically becomes an *enabling* force for the discourse that produces it.

A reversal mechanism is once again in operation here, for the semiotic body at stake in this text is not, as is conventionally the case, female; it is the sometimes transvestite but nonetheless decidedly male body of Raoule's mistress, Jacques. The focus of hystericizing discourse is clearly partitioned in this novel. Raoule receives the label of hysteric, along with the nervosity, the capriciousness, and the lubricity that fall under it (although one might argue that the hysteria effect, whose contagion we know, spreads to Jacques as well over the course of the novel). Jacques's share is less notably hysteria (in the clinical sense) than hystericization, or the aura created by hysteria's discourse: the reduction of the person to the body, and of the body to its sexuality, the pathologizing of this sexuality, and its conversion into a semiotic force.

At this point the medical and linguistic meanings of "semiotics" overlap: that branch of medicine charged with interpreting bodily signs or symptoms is harnessed by a sociolinguistic system that finds larger cultural meanings in such symptoms. Jacques's body traverses a semiotic spectrum in this novel, alternately becoming a poem, a text, a painting, a sculpture: in short, a semiotic object to be read, deciphered, interpreted, viewed, written, painted, and molded. Before we turn to specific examples of this aesthetic apotheosis, it may be useful to recall briefly both the broad tradition within which women in the nineteenth century are identified with texts and other objets d'art and the narrower, hyperbolic version of this tradition, which turns hysterics into mystics or poets and their bodies into inscriptions of their oeuvre.

When Balzac's Duchesse de Langeais dies, a victim of her passion, her grieving lover Montriveau is advised by a friend to think of her as no more than a book read in childhood, and Montriveau concurs: "Yes . . . for all she is now is a poem." In Mérimée's *Vénus d'Ille*, a bronze but otherwise uncannily lifelike Venus is given to the narrator as an exercise in reading: he must not only interpret the words engraved on her pedestal and the inscription on her arm but also give meaning to the marks on her body and decipher the character traits imprinted on



her face ("disdain, irony, cruelty could *be read* all over this face"). And in Zola's *The Masterpiece*, Christine Lantier, the model for her husband's masterpiece, is sacrificed for her own painted image; woman is replaced by man's representation of her.<sup>27</sup>

These excerpts from a century's archives begin to reconstruct a certain aesthetic economy in which female bodies are stifled into textuality, smudged into painting, or, in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's catch-all phrase, "killed into art."<sup>28</sup> The particular reliance of realist fiction on the binding of female energy has been elegantly analyzed by Naomi Schor, who suggests that the feminocentrism of the nineteenth-century novel can be attributed to this necessary relation between representation and woman.<sup>29</sup>

If the hysteric is — as doctors and novelists alike consistently represent her — a hyperbolic woman, "more woman-like than other women,"<sup>30</sup> then a similar argument can be made about the disproportionate place of hysteria in the late-nineteenth-century novel, that is, about this novel's dependence on the hysteric's incapacitation. For the fin-de-siècle text (both clinical and fictional) appropriates the hysteric's mute or inarticulate body, which is then pressed into service as a vehicle for any meaning the colonizing text seeks to express. Jules Claretie's *Les Amours d'un interne* provides the most concise, most literal illustration of this process. Consider briefly, for example, the scene in which the hysteric Mathilde lies unconscious at the Salpêtrière, surrounded by young interns who are observing their teacher while he traces letters on her bare skin with his fingernail. The doctor's touch leaves a raised, weltlike inscription on the woman's flesh, like a mystic's stigmata, and this text, impressed like a brand on her body, remains legible for hours, earning her the title "living writing paper."<sup>31</sup> This appellation bears witness to an instant of textual lucidity, for it is an implicit admission — revealing the underside of the woman-as-art topos — that Mathilde is not, after all, herself a text, but only the blank page on which the male doctor can write any message he chooses. Her body is being used as "a medium of communication between men" — phrasing I borrow from Anthony Wilden's discussion of crimes of violence perpetrated by men on women's bodies. Rather than speak, she — again, in Wilden's terms (via Lacan) — is "being spoken."<sup>32</sup>

Rachilde's sustained citation, throughout her novel, of different expressions of this topos is charged by a certain shock value; the reversal of convention, in which a *male* body is appropriated as textual surface by a *female* creative force, defamiliarizes the conventional power relation and thus puts it in question. The semiotic conversion of



Jacques's body originally takes poetic form. The poetry must, however, be replaced within the context of its writing in order for the cliché to emerge fully. The situation is as follows. Raoule's suitor Raittolbe takes advantage of her absence to accost Jacques. The interview ends badly: Raittolbe brutally beats Jacques, ostensibly because he is a spurned lover further incensed by the couple's perverse relationship. There is in fact a strong suggestion that the attack is motivated more by the soldier's repressed desire for Jacques than by revenge.<sup>33</sup> After this incident, fearful of Raoule's anger, Raittolbe sends her a letter in which he attempts to justify the beating as the outcome of a quarrel. Jacques, on the other hand, takes no steps to communicate his version of the story to Raoule:

Jacques knew Raittolbe's address, but he never thought of complaining. . . . Jacques, whose body was a poem, knew that his poem would always be read more attentively than any letter from such a vulgar writer as he (p. 327).

Jacques's body stands in for the epistle he doesn't send; his body *is* the message. Let us remember that the textualization of Jacques's body, however breathtaking this body may be in itself, is Raittolbe's doing. Jacques's flesh is legible only once it is marked, "streaked from top to bottom with long, bluish scars" (p. 328).<sup>34</sup> He is Raittolbe's text, and once Raoule has deciphered the inscription, she finds the message unambiguous: "Raoule, on her knees, was counting the brutal marks. . . . 'That's enough,' roared Raoule, . . . 'that man saw you! That's enough for me! I can guess the rest. . . . I must rub out every scar with my lips, or I shall always see you naked before him'" (p. 329). As Raoule's lips give way to tooth and nail, the work of erasure is accomplished by violent superscription, by the layering of scar over scar, trace on bloody trace. Jacques becomes a palimpsest: in and of himself neither poet nor poem, artist nor painting, he is instead a periodically reinscribed tablet or canvas passed back and forth in an ongoing conversation between Raoule and Raittolbe.<sup>35</sup> "Jacques," says Raoule, rather astutely, "is only a wound, and it [he] is our work of art" (p. 335).

With these words and our knowledge that Raoule is an artist who paints nudes, we might speculate, albeit fancifully, that Jacques is also an art work — perhaps even the one she has hanging in her bedroom: "a male nude, with no shading along the thighs" (p. 281). We leave the realm of speculation, however, at the end of the novel, for Raoule's aesthetic metaphor is explicitly realized when she has Jacques quite



literally “killed into art.” Finished off in a duel and reproduced as wax statue, Jacques is no longer mere *work of art*, but *masterpiece*: “This wax figure, an anatomical masterpiece, was fabricated by a German” (p. 366).

So the novel ends — not, however, without previously having alluded to Raoule’s collaboration with the German artist-cum-technician responsible for Jacques’s waxen image:

On the evening of that mournful day, [Raoule] bent over the bed . . . and, armed with silver pincers, a velvet-covered hammer, and a silver scalpel, engaged in a very delicate task . . . Occasionally she dried her tapering fingers with a lace handkerchief (p. 366).

The ellipsis is filled in when Jacques’s effigy is described:

a wax figure covered with transparent rubber. The red hair, the fair eye-lashes, the gold hair of the chest are natural; the teeth that are in the mouth, and the nails on the hands and feet, have been torn from a corpse (p. 366).

Putting aside for the moment the grotesquely spectacular nature of this representation, I want to consider it more specifically as a spectacle of cliché: Rachilde’s final, paroxysmic performance of a dizzying array of citations from the fin-de-siècle doxa. For while we recognize that Jacques’s death and aesthetic reincarnation cite a myriad of nineteenth-century heroines “killed into art,” the reproduction of his body is not cast of this or any other *single* element: it is a collage of citations as well as of material parts.

Jacques’s immortalization in the form of a wax statue is a specific quotation; its source is the wax workshop together with the wax museum at the Salpêtrière. There, in the mid-1870s, Charcot inaugurated the practice of casting in wax the convulsed or otherwise distorted bodies of his patients. This technique — one among many that would gradually aestheticize pathology — served no particular medical purpose (Charcot, after all, relied on living demonstrations for his lectures and his own experimentation); it served essentially to create museum pieces, to preserve pathology as an art form.<sup>36</sup>

Jacques’s wax double is a rather special copy of the Salpêtrière castings, however, for it comes equipped with “a hidden spring, installed at the inside of the hips, [which] connects with the mouth and brings it to life” (p. 366). Since the preceding sentence tells us that Raoule (in alternating male and female attire) visits the statue at night, embracing



it, kissing it on the lips, we can assume that the reference here is to a variant of necrophilia, whose fortune in the late nineteenth century hardly needs to be elaborated.

In the wake of all this decadent perversity, we are left somewhat in the lurch by the novel's bland final sentence — "This wax figure . . . was fabricated by a German" (p. 366) — a conclusion that appears at best anticlimactic and, at worst, irrelevant. However, when we recall that the ghoulish "anatomical masterpiece" is in fact a collaborative effort and when we then look more closely at the collaborators, what emerges is the conjugation of two clichés.

The cooperation of Raoule and the German presents us with a phantasmatic fin-de-siècle alliance of superwoman and superpower: a sex and a nation each grown too knowledgeable, too strong, too competitive, too threatening. We recall that the Commune fueled the already highly inflammable nineteenth-century imagination with the incendiary image of the *pétroleuse* — an image that rapidly spread from the literal (if perhaps mythic) women reputed to have set fire to much of Paris during the Commune, to any and all women involved in the revolutionary movement of 1871, and, eventually, to any women perceived as being out of their place, out of (male) control, in competition with men — and often, symptomatically, in trousers.<sup>37</sup> This image of a female menace, of women as destroyers — literal cutthroat competitors of men — was further inflated, over the course of the next two decades, by the passage of the Camille Sée Law of 1880, which provided for state-funded secondary education for women, and the passage in 1884 of more liberal divorce laws, which allowed women to initiate divorce proceedings. Already beginning to take shape in the 1880s was the mythic specter the 1890s would term the *new woman*, the overeducated, overambitious woman who inverted gender roles and dislocated bourgeois values.<sup>38</sup>

The equally threatening stereotype of the German can be traced to the same period, for the Commune was of course roughly contemporaneous with the siege of Paris and the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. This humiliating defeat was generally interpreted as proof that France had declined militarily in the nineteenth century because it had allowed Germany to outstrip it scientifically and industrially. Germany emerges from this period perceived as not only the enemy but as a threatening supertechnological force.<sup>39</sup>

By condensation, the *pétroleuses* and the besiegers of Paris become the joint forces that "unmanned" France. The two phantasmatic Others that converge historically and mythically in 1871 continue to



haunt the French imagination in tandem a decade later, their respective roles virtually unchanged: the German fabricates the mannequin, that is, supplies the necessary technical knowledge and skill, while Raoule, the trouser-wearing, corpse-mutilating maenad, is responsible for the grisly detail work.<sup>40</sup>

The lifelike mannequin they create, a combined marvel of technology and art, demands a closer look. Our glance, however, need not be excessively penetrating in order to reveal that the "anatomical masterpiece," image of anatomical perfection, flawless reproduction of the male form, is in fact a body in pieces. For we know that the vision of unity, the illusion of ideal wholeness, is constructed by supplementing the wax image with myriad fragments of the body it represents. The plucked hairs, the teeth and nails torn from Jacques's corpse, complete the representation, but in so doing, they decompose it. Even as they produce an effect of hyperrealism, these body remnants deconstruct the very concept of mimetic realism by destroying the integrity of the referent, *flaunting* by their mere presence the fragmentary, defective status of the real.

Rachilde insists, in other words, that the statue can be no more than its separate parts — no greater and no more coherent than the bits and pieces of the social discourse that produces it (among which, the fiction of its creation by Raoule and the German). Neither body snippets nor discursive fragments can be recuperated in the name of mimetic realism, because the realist aesthetic is merely another citation writ large on this body and contradicted by its finer features.

Among these, the fine hairs Raoule plucks from Jacques's cadaver are of particular (if unexpected) relevance to the fate of realism's clichés. Now, if we very schematically posit the defining characteristics of traditional realism as totalization and the detail, the first accomplished by means of the second, and if we also accept that the process whereby the realist detail is totalized or idealized is often fetishistic in nature (i.e., an absent referential plenitude is artificially replaced), then we might read a good deal between the hairs reattached to the wax body.<sup>41</sup> We might recall being shown Raoule *armed* with silver pincers (p. 366; my emphasis), engaged in a very delicate task (p. 366), and we might then be tempted to describe this labor of plucking and, later, reattaching hairs as fetishistic in the extreme.

Except for two qualifying factors. First, the fetish (etymologically related to the factitious) is by definition an artificial (though not necessarily inorganic) supplement to the real, whereas here, we have the real supplementing art. Second, the fetish, as figured in traditional



anatomical terms, is a phallic substitute whose effect, in more abstract terms, is one of essentialization, centralization, fixation, and unity. But in Rachilde's version, where what is at stake is replacing "the red hair, the fair eyelashes, the gold hair of the chest" (p. 366), there is, on the contrary, a sense of randomness, dispersal, displacement, and plurality: a scatter effect peculiarly emphasized from the beginning of the novel, when Raoule first takes note of Jacques's hirsuteness: "he had curls everywhere" (p. 289). There is, in the emphatic and sustained attention paid in this novel to every form and site of male hair, an apparent defetishizing of the phallus and a reinvestment in a more general erotics of the body — a reinvestment similar, in its sexual detailing, to a fetish but one that I hesitate to name fetishistic precisely because it is general, mobile, diffuse.

A challenge to my argument for defetishizing this body arises, however, in the form of that curious detail of the statue that I mentioned earlier: "a hidden spring, installed at the inside of the hips" (p. 366). How are we to read this "spring"? Is it a metaphor whose purpose is to insist that the mannequin is anatomically correct? Or is it a sign that the mannequin has been anatomically corrected — hence a prosthesis, in other words, a fetish? To complicate matters, I should add that an explicit displacement from hair to phallus takes place much earlier in this novel, when, immediately after the observation of Jacques's omnipresent curls, we are told "he would have been mistaken, it is true, if he had sworn that they were the only proof of his virility" (p. 289). This initial displacement sets a precedent that reopens the possibility — though not the certainty — of fetishism, that is, of a phallic recuperation of all the dispersed tufts, strands, and lashes. Perhaps they are only displaced.

But does it really matter whether the odd emphasis, in *Monsieur Vénus*, on hair and hair transplants constitutes a fetish or not? Or is the issue unnecessary, undecidable, a matter of splitting hairs, as it were, a distraction from the larger issues of representation and cliché? Only apparently: the premise underlying my exploration of this area thus far, and one that I would like to address more explicitly now, is that the statue, the "masterpiece of anatomy," should also be read as the anatomy of representation according to Rachilde.

At stake in our reading of the mannequin's anatomy is our interpretation of the representational aesthetic informing *Monsieur Vénus* and, therefore, the way we read this text. If we opt for a nonfetishistic representation of the statue, as I tend to, we read body and text as decentered, detotalized, a collage of corporal remnants or citational



fragments. The text, in this case, presents no cohering vision or overarching meaning: it simply repeats, sometimes to breaking point, the tired images of its day. Jacques, who in life is a repository of cliché, a representation of fin-de-siècle stereotypes, in death (which is to say, in art) becomes a copy of a copy, a representation of himself as representation: the self-referential body of cliché — or in short, Rachilde's parrot. (After all, "all parrots are called Jacquot," says the narrator of *Un Coeur simple*.<sup>42</sup>)

The statue, in other words, is a simulacrum; no mere copy but — avatar of the mannequins called *simulacra*<sup>43</sup> that, in Caesar's time, held victims to be burned in honor of the gods — a representation based on absence, mimetic void, referential sacrifice. If we view the statue as simulacrum, we are of course substituting, for the deconstructed realist aesthetic, a once-iconoclastic perspective long since recuperated as modernist aesthetic.

If, on the other hand, we choose to read a fetishized version of *Monsieur Vénus*, the novel becomes a story of perversion, a story about pathology, or, as Barrès sees it, a perverted, pathological narrative. In short, the citations are read for their semantic content rather than their cliché emptiness: irony is unread, ideology is transparent, bodily fragments and discursive shards are idealized, reinstated in an interpretive whole, recuperated by a mimetic vision.

The problem these two alternatives pose for me is that, while I adopt the first, I cannot dismiss the second, largely because it is inscribed as a possibility in the very uncertainty of Rachilde's text. On the microcosmic level, Rachilde produces consummate ambiguity by presenting a defetishized image of the mannequin's body, along with the possibility of refetishizing it — and ambiguity is of course the very stuff of fetishists' dreams. On the macrocosmic level, I find overwhelming irony in the novel's cliché structure and read Rachilde as iconoclastic, a breaker (or at least a batterer) of the verbal icons of her culture. At the same time, I recognize ironic repetition as repetition nonetheless and find ironic mimicry and compliant performance to be not always distinguishable, in individual cases. And I have before me, irrevocably present in the republished edition of the novel, the preface by Maurice Barrès, evidence that *Monsieur Vénus* can also be read as a maker or at least an affirmer of the same icons I see dented or cracked.

Furthermore, we cannot *avoid* reading text and preface together, not only in the antagonistic sense I suggested earlier (the novel as deconstructive reading of its preface), but also as complicitous: Rachilde



after all accepted Barrès's offer to introduce her novel, and we can only assume she read his text and approved it before publication. The book, in other words, is a package, and it is wrapped to sell — to cater, paradoxically, to the reigning ideology against which I have argued Rachilde's irony is directed.

The original two alternatives, once examined, suggest a plethora of interpretations. Let me briefly evoke a sampling. (1) Rachilde is using ironic repetition to deconstruct the ideology I have called hystericization. Her text (and her irony) are then appropriated by Barrès; the irony changes camps. (2) Again, assume Rachilde is using repetition ironically; consider now, however, that the addition of the preface only accentuates her irony by illustrating its target. (3) Assume instead that Rachilde is a compliant performer of the passwords and bywords of her time; she gratefully accepts Barrès's sincere offer to champion her novel. (4) As in the last case, assume that Rachilde is a compliant consumer of the doxa, but consider now that Barrès's gratefully received preface makes ironic the novel he appears to be championing. (5) Continuing to posit Rachilde's compliance, consider the possibility that the confrontation of Rachilde's nonironic novel and Barrès's nonironic preface results nonetheless in a textual irony. (6) The reader chooses any of the above interpretations and consequently falls victim to a textual irony.

If we choose to refuse irony, we risk becoming irony's dupe. But if we make any specific irony our choice, we refuse the mobile irony that inhabits the text, and risk the same fate. How then do we settle this dilemma? I don't think we do; I don't think we can. I persist in my ironic reading of *Monsieur Vénus*, all the while admitting that the irony of irony is its inclusion of naive repetition. Speaking for irony, I find myself in the somewhat bewildering position of speaking as a fetishist: "I know . . . but just the same."<sup>44</sup> If it is true, as Nathaniel Wing has suggested, that irony "serves as an alibi for a fetish,"<sup>45</sup> then perhaps we can conceive of the ironist as the fetishist's apprentice, reaching out for all readers, ensnaring them in a tangle of ambiguity, uncertainty, and indecision from which there is no escape. Irony quite possibly makes fetishists of us all.



## NOTES

1. Maurice Barrès, preface to *Monsieur Vénus*, by Rachilde, is included in this volume, p. 269. Subsequent references to Barrès's preface and to the text of *Monsieur Vénus* are to the edition in this volume and are cited parenthetically.
2. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 337.
3. See Dominick LaCapra, *Madame Bovary on Trial* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 16.
4. See Eve Sedgwick's illuminating comments on the reification of innocence (as exemplified by Diderot's *The Nun*) in "Privilege of Unknowing," *Genders* 1 (Spring 1988), 102-24.
5. In an 1888 letter to Rachilde, reproduced in the Boyd translation of *Monsieur Vénus*, trans. Madeleine Boyd (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929) Barrès expresses his desire to write "twenty beautiful pages, explaining how and why it is a masterpiece," p. 17.
6. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1990).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
8. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987), p. 210.
9. Italics appear on the average about every third page; in the central section of the novel they occur more frequently (approximately every page, often with multiple appearances on a page).
10. Ross Chambers, *Mélancolie et opposition* (Paris: Corti, 1987), p. 192. Chambers goes on to suggest that such a reading ("une lecture simplement ironique") is insufficient.
11. See, e.g., the discussions about the inappropriate nature of the occupation for a young girl in Emile Zola's *L'Assommoir*. Nana does become a flower maker, and the sequel to her story, recounted in *L'Assommoir* and then in *Nana*, supports her family's prediction, and her century's received wisdom.
12. Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson (1933; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).
13. Examples of fluid sexual identity abound. When, for instance, Jacques is compared to the Callipygian Venus — his body feminized — his virility (phallicity) is then emphasized: "Beneath the armpits, and even lower, was curly golden hair. Jacques Silvert had told the truth, for he had curls everywhere, but he would have been mistaken, it is true, if he had sworn that they were the only proof of his virility" (p. 289). And in another incident, Jacques enters Raittolbe's apartment dressed in drag; later Raoule enters dressed in drag; finally both leave together in regular attire. The valet recounts the event: "'Madame Silvert, whom I would have sworn as blond as corn when she came in, was as black as soot when she went out. In any case, she is a very stunning woman!'" (p. 362).
14. On the generally accepted idea that truth and sexual identity are intimately bound, see Foucault's lapidary introduction to *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Dis-*



covered *Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

15. Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

16. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 101.

17. Jan Goldstein has brilliantly shown the political underpinnings of this teleological venture: "The redefinition of the supernatural as the natural-pathological . . . had the effect of debunking religion; it was consonant with the frenetic crusade for laicization that marked republican politics in this era." Goldstein, *Console and Classify* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 371. As she points out, although "retrospective medicine" (so dubbed by Emile Littré in 1869) was a new label, the practice was not entirely new, having been used in passing in support of the monomania diagnosis earlier in the century; however, only among the Charcot group did retrospective medicine become "an intensively cultivated genre" (p. 370, n.159).

18. Translation is mine. These excerpts all cite — or paraphrase — Tissot, but with slight variations, which suggests they are quoting from memory, a commonplace without a precise reference. I have been unable to find the original source of this much-quoted warning.

19. Sigmund Freud, writing of his time studying at the Salpêtrière, reports Charcot's sotto voce comment on the etiology of hysteria: "It is always the genital thing . . . always . . . always . . . always." This statement is of course a flagrant contradiction of his official position on the matter. Freud, "On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: Hogarth, 1966), vol. 14, pp. 1-66.

20. P. Briquet, *Traité clinique et thérapeutique de l'hystérie* (Paris: Baillière, 1859), p. 56; my translation.

21. Désiré-Magloire Bourneville and P. Regnard, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Progrès Médical, 1878), p. 124; my translation.

22. Jean-Martin Charcot, *L'Hystérie*, ed. E. Trillat (Toulouse: Privat, 1971), p. 178; my translation.

23. *Ibid.*, "Hystérie et dégénérescence chez l'homme," p. 143; my translation.

24. Jacques Joseph Morau de Tours, *La Psychologie morbide* (Paris: Victor Masson, 1859); Bénédict Auguste Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences* (Paris: Baillière, 1857); Jules Déjerine, *L'Hérédité dans les maladies du système nerveux* (Paris, 1886). There is a good general account of the work of Moreau, Morel, and others in George Frederick Drinka's *The Birth of Neurosis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

25. There is also a suggestion that Raoule's mother died of a syphilis transmitted to her by her husband: "Perhaps her husband had followed her to the tomb, another victim of an accident he had caused, since one of his old servants used to say that when dying he had accused himself of causing the premature death of his wife" (p. 282).

26. Charcot, "Hystérie et dégénérescence," p. 142; my translation.

27. Honoré de Balzac, *La Duchesse de Langeais*, in *La Comédie Humaine*, ed. Pierre-



Georges Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), vol. 5, p. 1037; Prosper Mérimée, *La Vénus d'Ille*, in *Carmen et autres nouvelles* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1983), vol. 2, p. 89; Zola, *L'Oeuvre*, vol. 4 of *Les Rougon-Macquart* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); my translations.

28. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 17.

29. Naomi Schor, *Breaking the Chain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 144.

30. Charles Richet, "Les Démoniaques d'aujourd'hui," in *Revue des Deux Mondes* 37 (15 janvier 1880), p. 346; my translation.

31. Jules Claretie, *Les Amours d'un interne* (Paris: Dentu, 1881), p. 312; my translation.

32. Anthony Wilden, "In the Penal Colony: The Body as the Discourse of the Other," *Semiotica* 54.1-2 (1985), pp. 40, 77.

33. "[Raittolbe] seized Jacques's arm. The latter shrank back and, as his floating sleeve left his arm bare, Raittolbe felt the mother-of-pearl skin beneath his fingers [...] Raittolbe [...] jumped upon the damnable creature whose velvet gown appeared to him now like the darkness of an abyss [...] 'Now you know what a real man is like, scoundrell' Raittolbe howled, seized by a blind anger whose violence he could not understand" (pp. 324-25).

34. Earlier in the novel, Raoule is moved to invoke poetry when she first catches sight of Jacques's nude body: "The terrible poetry of human nudity, I understand it at last, I who tremble for the first time in trying to read it with blasé eyes" (p. 289). It is significant that the poem, at this preliminary point, is more generally one of human nudity, and that Raoule is still struggling to read the message, which becomes legible only once Raittolbe marks the exquisite writing surface.

35. Although Jacques dabbles in painting, his artistic pretensions are dismissed. Raoule evaluates one of his paintings: "a heavy landscape, where five or six stiff sheep were grazing on a field of pale green, with so little regard for the laws of perspective that, between them, two appeared to have five legs" (p. 278). The architect Martin Durand offers an appraisal that is more direct, but no more positive: "he has not got the slightest trace of talent" (p. 337).

36. For the specific practice of sculpting or casting at the Salpêtrière, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie* (Paris: Macula, 1982), pp. 33-34, 122-24; and Claretie's novelized account of the same, *Les Amours d'un interne*, pp. 112, 222. Beyond the specific references, Didi-Huberman's entire book is a brilliant account of and reflection on the transformation of hysteria into spectacle at the Salpêtrière; my thinking is indebted to him.

37. On the *pétroleuses*, see Edith Thomas's excellent account, *Les Pétroleuses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963). Claire Goldberg Moses also gives much valuable information about the background and legacy of the *pétroleuses* in *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany: Suny Press, 1984).

38. See Moses, *French Feminism*.



39. See Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, p. 348.

40. The rising German and declining French birthrate in the years after 1870 was cause for great anxiety in France, as was German industrial expansion, often cited in explanation of the French defeat in 1870. See Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), ch. 4, for an informative account of the menace posed to the bourgeois family by the "new woman."

41. For a fascinating analysis of interconnections between realism and the detail, see Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail* (New York: Methuen, 1987), which informs my reading of *Monsieur Vénus*.

42. "[The parrot] was put next to the door, and several people were surprised that he didn't answer to the name of Jacquot, since all parrots are called Jacquot." Flaubert, *Un Coeur simple, Trois Contes*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Bruneau and Bernard Masson (Paris: Seuil, 1964), p. 174; my translation.

43. I owe this information to Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie*, p. 267.

44. This is Octave Mannoni's formulation of the structure of the fetish, and more generally, of fetishistic thinking. The fetishist *knows* that an old cherished belief is false, but nonetheless continues to believe it. The *nonetheless* is not articulated: it *is* the fetish. Mannoni, "Je sais bien, mais quand même..." in *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scène* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), pp. 9-33; my translation. The existence of a perplexing pamphlet by Rachilde, *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (Paris: Editions de France, 1928), only fortifies the irony of *Monsieur Vénus*. Despite the title and the blatantly misogynistic pronouncements sprinkled throughout this text, the politics of its author defy definition. The narrative voice, prone to contradiction, evasiveness, ambiguity, and paradox, may or may not be ironic at any given moment. Chameleonlike, Rachilde's narrator can never be located behind the rapid succession of rhetorical disguises she — like the actress/woman of letters of this chapter's epigraph — takes on. In her excellent intellectual biography (in progress) of Rachilde, "Rachilde's Paroxysms of Chastity," Melanie Hawthorne helps to reinterpret as writing strategies some of the paradoxes of both Rachilde's politics and her style.

45. Nathaniel Wing, *The Limits of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 77.







## CONTENTS

PREFACE	269
---------	-----

## MONSIEUR VÉNUS

CHAPTER I	274
II	279
III	284
IV	291
V	300
VI	306
VII	312
VIII	318
IX	325
X	330
XI	336
XII	343
XIII	347
XIV	354
XV	359
XVI	366



# MONSIEUR VÉNU

by Rachilde

## PREFACE

### *The Complications of Love*

THOUGH THIS BOOK is rather abominable, I can't say that it really shocks me. Very serious people I know have not been scandalized but amused, astonished, and interested; they place *Monsieur Vénus* on the forbidden shelves of their libraries, along with certain books from the last century that disturb our sensibilities but make us think.

*Monsieur Vénus* explains the soul of a very unusual young woman. I believe this book should be regarded as an anatomy. Those who are interested only in the nuances of good writing will lose their time turning these pages; but when most of the books they appreciate have been forgotten for a long time, people will still be seeking in this book the violent emotion that the spectacle of unusual perversity always gives to inquiring and thoughtful minds.

The nicety of the perverseness of this book lies in the fact that it was written by a young girl of twenty. What a marvelous masterpiece! Printed in Belgium, it is a masterpiece that revolted critical opinion at first and was read only by the foul minded and by a few of the very thoughtful. This volume, with all its tender and wicked passions and with all its forms of love which smell of death, is the work of a child, of the sweetest and most retiring child! Of course, for the true dandy, this adds a supreme charm. The refinements of vice, bursting from the dreams of a virgin, are inexplicably mysterious, as mysterious as crime, genius, or a child's folly, and in some ways similar to all three.

Rachilde was born with an infamous mind, infamous and playful. All those who love the unusual study it uneasily. Jean Lorrain, who must have been pleased with her, gives a delightful sketch of his visit to Rachilde. "I found," he said, "a school girl, with sober and reserved mien, very pale, it is true, but with a studious schoolgirl's pallor, rather thin, frail, with extremely small hands, with the grave profile of a young



Greek or a young Frenchman in love . . . and eyes — such eyes! Wide, wide, made heavy by unbelievable eyelashes, and clear as water, eyes that ignore everything, so much so that one can easily believe that Rachilde does not see with those eyes, but with others at the back of her head, with the aid of which she seeks and discovers the strong spices with which she peppers her works." These lines, which recall Whistler, express perfectly the pallor and gravity of this firebrand.

But we who ordinarily dislike obscenity would not write about this book merely to praise a queer child. We love *Monsieur Vénus* because it is an analysis of one of the most curious cases of self-love produced by our pride-sick century. These pages, feverishly written by a minor, despite all their artistic weaknesses, are as interesting to the psychologist as *Adolphe*, as *Mlle de Maupin*, as *Crime D'Amour*, which contain studies of some of the rare phenomena of love.

Of course the little girl who wrote this marvelous *Monsieur Vénus* did not have such aesthetics worked out in her head. She did not plan to give us an extraordinary monograph on the "maladie du siècle." No, she simply had bad instincts, which she acknowledged with incredible malice. She had always been improper. When still very young — erratic, generous, full of strange enthusiasms — she frightened her parents, the gentlest parents in the world; she astonished Périgord. Instinctively she began to describe the emotions of an unusual virgin — herself. Gathering her petticoats gently between her legs, this child slid down the enervating incline that goes from Joseph Delorme to *Les Fleurs du mal*, and lower still — she slid gaily, carelessly, as, with a less noble brain and a different education, she would have shot down a roller coaster.

Young girls seem very complicated to us, because we don't perceive clearly enough that they are governed only by their instincts, being small animals, tricky, selfish, and passionate. At twenty Rachilde wrote a book that amazed everybody, and wrote it with scarcely any reflection; she wrote easily, following her instincts. The wonder is that she should have had such instincts.

In all her works, which are numerous today, Rachilde has done nothing but tell her own story.

I do not need to point out where *Monsieur Vénus* is true or false; any reader who knows the romantic exaggerations of a twenty-year-old brain will easily distinguish the author's embellishments from the authentic passages. I imagine that if one suppresses the childishness of the setting and the tragedy of the story, keeping only the essential features of Raoule de Vénérande and of the deplorable Jacques Silvert, one would be very close to one of the most extraordinary deformities of



love, which the *maladie du siècle* has produced in the soul of a young woman.

Here is the summary of the little masterpiece:

Mlle Raoule de Vénérande is a delicate, nervous girl, with thin lips of a not especially pleasing contour. In a flower maker's shop she notices a young workman. Crowned with roses, which he skillfully weaves into garlands, this young man, with very dark red hair, delights her because of his dimpled chin, his childishly clear and smooth flesh, and the little fold about his neck, a fold of a plump, newborn babe; and then his eyes, like a suffering dog's, with a thin film of tears over them. All the description is in this vein, commonplace and natural. Raoule settles this plump, pretty boy in a romantic apartment; she catches him licking even the rollers of the furniture underneath their multicolored fringes, drunk with the folly of a fiancée with her trousseau. With a very witty cynicism she upsets him when he wishes to be loveable, she pushes him into a dressing room and causes him to blush from her audacity in examining and complimenting him, this lout she has picked up in the name of charity. And the poor humiliated male kneels on the train of Raoule's dress and sobs. Because, as Rachilde excellently says, he was the son of a drunkard and a prostitute, and his only honor lay in tears. This *Monsieur Vénus*, completely desexed by a series of ingenious devices, becomes Raoule's *mistress* — that is to say, she loves him, humors him, caresses him, is irritated by him, and is tender to him, without ever yielding to his desires, which would immediately make her the lout's inferior. She trembles when she is near him, but she despises him. She defines her taste admirably: "I shall love Jacques as a man hopelessly loves his dead fiancée."

That is the theme of the novel, as I like to see it, stripped of the equivocations that only weaken the book and smack too much of a virgin's ignorance, the ignorance of a virgin who, I believe, was tampering with things about which she did not know. It ensures Rachilde a very definite standing in the hierarchy of intellect.

She is not a moralist, and at twenty she would have been really unbearable if she had pretended to be. Indeed, it is obvious throughout the book that Rachilde admires Raoule de Vénérande.

And she is not a psychologist with a purely detached interest in love and its complexities. She describes the very personal acts of a proud young woman but does not explain the development of such a nature. After reading her we still do not know by what combination of the emotions and the intellect, in a society as straitlaced as ours, in a family as respectable as hers, such a monster could appear.



Rachilde is very witty and has a coquettish lightness, but she is not very much interested in improving the form of her work by hard labor. Neither a moralist, although she puts forward a theory of love, nor a psychologist, although she sometimes analyzes, nor an artist, in spite of her brilliant mind, Rachilde belongs to the most interesting category of writers, in the opinion of fastidious and disdainful minds. She writes sincere pages only to excite and intensify her own sensations. Her book is the prolongation of her life. To such writers, the novel is only a means of expressing that emotion that the humdrum of life obliges one to repress, or at least to conceal.

Perhaps *Monsieur Vénus* is at bottom a true story; but were it only a dream, it would nonetheless show a very peculiar state of mind. I will add that such dreams are extremely powerful. The woman who dreams, who weeps, who tells of a love she longs for, as a rule soon secures it. Such perversions of the instincts, adoration for a wretched creature who is pretty as a child, plump and feeble as a woman, but of the male sex, can be found through the ages. According to laws that are beyond our comprehension, strange and dormant ancestral desires sometimes arise, to the surface of our souls. Raoule de Vénérande, that pale, thin-lipped, demented woman, who bathes the ambiguous body of Jacques Silvert, recalls, despite all the differences of climate, civilization, and epoch, the Phrygian vertigo, when the women lamented Attis, the small, pink, too-fat male. These obscure complications of love are not made up of enervation alone, for with them is mixed a kind of disturbing mysticism. The Raoule de Vénérande of the novel has for a guardian a pious relative, who never ceases to stigmatize troubled humanity. Rachilde writes: "God should have created love and the senses separately. Real love should be made up of nothing but warm friendship. Let us sacrifice the bestial senses."

Such tender but, in spite of all, impure dreams have always tempted the proudest minds. A Catholic novelist, Joséphin Péladan, thought he could yield to those unhealthy sensations without offending his religion. However, the man who thinks to satisfy with such sensualism his entire nature, his noble desires for justice, tenderness, and beauty, is descending a miserable path. Human love is sure to be mixed with many obscure complications, if fatherhood does not suffice. The superior man learns very quickly that he cannot expect anything from a woman. Whatever kindness he sees in these creatures' glances he shies away from; it is only youth that lends beauty to their clear eyes; with their first words he encounters the humiliation of being fascinated by a lower being. Woman, on her side, reasons the same way; she won't yield to



man, who is often very brutal, but whose embraces can cause a slight tremor in her, curious and insatiable as she is.

To what mysterious cults are the men and women, whom self-love keeps apart, to devote themselves? In what peculiar practices shall they seek caresses, they who often complicate their moral susceptibilities with an extreme nervous tension?

The *maladie du siècle*, which must always enter into the discussion, one of the most interesting feminine forms of which is clearly exhibited in *Monsieur Vénus*, is made up of an excessive nervous fatigue and a pride hitherto unknown. Before this book was written, all the peculiarities it brought into the consciousness, so far as love is concerned, had not been pointed out. Passing over that divine and troubling elegy of René, it is in M. de Custine, a great unknown novelist, and in Baudelaire that we must seek the formulas (very much concealed, of course) of complicated love — complicated for the reason that it endeavors to avoid besmirchment. One might behold, to one's horror, certain persons arriving at a disgust for feminine charms, while *Monsieur Vénus* proclaims a hatred of masculine force.

A complication with great consequences! The disgust for woman! The hatred of male force! Some minds have dreamed of an unsexed race, but such dreams smack of death. And as for the last pages of the volume, when *Monsieur Vénus* is dead, we see Raoule de Vénérande watching and lamenting before a wax image! The image of her vulgar Adonis!

Tearful fantasy of a solitary being; a cerebral eccentricity, but one that has its interest — for the psychologist, the moralist, and the artist, *Monsieur Vénus* is a very significant symptom, the more so since one is able, I repeat, easily to distinguish between a novelist's exaggerations and the conditions arising from a nervous tension that is becoming more and more common in both sexes.

No, this autobiography of the most peculiar of young women is not a naughty trick. In spite of the pages that attempt to be sadistic and that only succeed in being very naive and obscure, this book, to my mind, is to be viewed as a curiosity that will last, for the same reason that certain books of a century ago are still read, though many more perfect works are forgotten. Modern criticism willingly substitutes pathological curiosity for literary curiosity; it is the author that the most distinguished minds seek in a work. You know here that the author is a young woman full of gentleness and understanding and that a sensual and mystical frenzy is to be found in her book. Does it not seem to you that *Monsieur Vénus*, in addition to the light it throws on certain deprav-



ities of love in our time, is a very interesting case for those who study the connection, always so difficult to seize on, between a work of art and the brain that has conceived it?

By what mysterious process has Rachilde built up Raoule de Vénérande and Jacques Silvert? How did that child, with her healthy education, become the author of those ambiguous creations? The problem is extremely interesting.

An eminent psychologist, M. Jules Soury, who is methodically interested in the many curious forms of human behavior, once said of Restif de la Bretonne: "Those who write such books are no more responsible than a hydra-headed monster; they are beautiful cases of teratology. The tomb and oblivion are only for the crowd. He can claim the honors of the dissecting room and the Dupuytren Museum." Those are the words I would apply to the comrade I have the honor of studying, if I were not afraid of seeming to her a little heavy.

*Maurice Barrès*

## MONSIEUR VÉNUŠ

### CHAPTER I

In the dark, narrow passage that the concierge had pointed out, Mlle de Vénérande was groping for a door.

The seventh floor was not lighted at all, and fear had suddenly gripped her in the midst of this unsavory hovel, when she remembered that there were matches in her cigarette case. By the light of the match she discovered number 10 and read this card:

*Marie Silvert, flower maker, designer.*

Then, as the key was in the door, she entered, but the smell of apples cooking caught in her throat and stopped her short upon the threshold. No smell disgusted her so much as the smell of apples, and so it was with a shudder of disgust that she looked around the garret before revealing her presence.

Seated at a table on which a lamp was smoking was a man, absorbed in very painstaking work, his back turned to the door. Around his body, over his loose smock, was thrown a garland of roses, very big roses of flesh-colored satin with deep red, velvety tracings. They ran up between



his legs to his shoulders and around his neck. On his right was a spray of gillyflowers, and on his left a bunch of violets.

On a disorderly pallet in a corner of the room were piled paper lilies. Branches of bungled flowers and dirty plates, topped off by an empty bottle, were strewn between two chairs whose straw was broken. A small cracked stove sent its pipe into the pane of a skylight and watched over the apples spread before it with one red eye.

The man felt the cold let in through the open door; he raised the lampshade and turned around.

"Am I mistaken, Monsieur?" asked the visitor, disagreeably surprised. "I want Marie Silvert, please."

"This is her place, Madame, and for the time being, I am Marie Silvert."

Raoule could not help smiling; the answer, made by a male voice, had something grotesque about it, enhanced if possible by the embarrassed pose of the boy holding his roses.

"You make flowers? You do them like a real flower maker."

"Of course, I have to. My sister is ill. She is sleeping over there in that bed... poor girl! Yes, very ill. A fever makes her hands tremble. She can't do anything well... I know how to paint, but I said to myself that if I worked in her place I would earn my living better than if I drew animals or copied photographs. Orders are not very plentiful," he concluded, "but I manage to earn a month's pay."

He craned his neck to watch the sleeping sick woman. Nothing stirred under the lilies. He offered the young woman one of the chairs. Raoule drew her sealskin coat around her and sat down with the greatest reluctance. She had stopped smiling.

"Madame wishes...?" the young man asked, letting go of his garland so that he might close his smock, which was wide open, exposing his chest.

"Your sister's address," answered Raoule, "was given to me by someone who said she was a true artist. I must consult with her about an evening gown. Can't you wake her?"

"An evening gown? Oh! Madame, do not fear, no use waking her. I'll see to that for you. Let us see, what do you want? Bunches, garlands, or detached flowers?"

The young woman, ill at ease, wanted to go away. Haphazardly she picked up a rose and looked at its heart, which the flower maker had enhanced with a small bit of crystal.

"You are talented, very talented," she repeated, pulling at the satin petals.



The smell of baking apples was becoming unbearable.

The artist sat opposite his new client and pulled the lamp between them to the edge of the table. Thus, they could see each other from head to toe. Their eyes met. Raoule, as though blinded, blinked behind her veil.

Marie Silvert's brother had red hair, a deep, almost russet color; he was a little thickset, with jutting hips, straight legs, and slim ankles.

His hair, growing low and straight, was stiff, thick, and rebellious to the comb. Under his black, well-defined eyebrows his eyes were strange, although stupid.

He looked at people as suffering dogs do, through a dim veil of tears. Such animals' tears are always heartrending. His mouth had the firm contour of all healthy mouths, which smoking, saturating them with its virile fumes, had not yet faded. At times his teeth showed so very white behind his crimson lips that one wondered why those milky drops did not dry up between those two firebrands. The dimpled chin, modeled in smooth childish flesh, was adorable. Around the neck was a little fold, the fold that encircles the neck of a plump newborn babe. The wide hands, the grumbling voice, and the thick, low-growing hair were the only indications of his sex.

Raoule was forgetting her order; an extraordinary torpor was seizing her, benumbing her words, but she felt better; the hot steam from the apples no longer annoyed her; and the flowers, strewn among the dirty plates, seemed even poetic.

Rather moved, she went on: "You see, Monsieur, it is for a costume ball, and I am in the habit of wearing flowers especially designed for me. I will go as a *water nymph* in a Grévin costume, wearing a tunic of white cashmere with green beads and rushes; so you see, there must be a background of river plants, nympheas, sagittaria, lentils, water lilies . . . Do you think you can do that in a week?"

"I think so, Madame, a work of art!" the young man answered, smiling in turn. Then, taking a pencil, he made some designs on a sheet of paper.

"That's right, that's right," Raoule approved, following him with her eyes. "Very soft colors. Don't leave out any details. Any price you say! Sagittaria with long arrowlike pistils and very pink nympheas, touched with brown."

She had taken the pencil to correct some lines; when she bent toward the lamp, the diamond clasp that held her coat sparkled. Silvert saw it and became respectful.

"The work," he said, "will cost me one hundred francs, I can give



you the design for fifty; I am not making much on it, Madame."

Raoule took three bank notes from her pocketbook, which bore a coat of arms.

"Here," she said simply. "I have full confidence in you."

The young man made such a quick movement, in such a burst of joy, that his smock came open again. Upon his chest, Raoule saw the same red shadow that marked his lips, like tangled gold threads.

Mlle de Vénérande thought that she might eat one of those apples without too great disgust.

"How old are you?" she asked, without taking her eyes off his transparent skin, more velvety than the roses in the garland.

"I am twenty-four, Madame," and he added very awkwardly: "At your service."

The woman moved her head, closing her eyes, not daring to look again.

"You look as if you were eighteen. A man who makes flowers — how funny! You are very badly housed in this garret, with a sick sister. Heavens! The skylight gives you so little light. No, no! Do not give me back any change — three hundred francs is nothing. By the way, my address; write it down: Mademoiselle de Vénérande, 74 Avenue des Champs-Élysées, Hôtel de Vénérande. You'll bring them yourself. I can count on it, can't I?"

Her voice cracked; her head felt very heavy. Mechanically, Silvert picked up a daisy stem, rolled it between his fingers, and unconsciously used the skilled touch of a trained woman in manipulating the piece of fabric to give it the appearance of a blade of grass.

"All right, next Tuesday, Madame. I shall be there, count on me. I promise you a masterpiece . . . you are too generous!"

Raoule arose, a nervous tremor shook her all over. Had she caught a fever among these poor wretches?

The young man remained seated, mouth open, sunk in joy, fingering the three blue pieces of paper — three hundred francs! He no longer thought of hiding his chest, on which the lamp lit up its golden gleams.

"I could have dispatched my dressmaker with my instructions," murmured Mlle de Vénérande, as if to answer a secret reproach and to excuse herself; "but when I saw your samples I chose to come myself. By the way, didn't you tell me you are a painter? Is that yours?"

Moving her head she indicated a panel hanging on the wall, between a gray rag and a soft hat.

"Yes, Madame," said the artist, raising the lamp.

With a quick look, Raoule saw a heavy landscape, where five or six



stiff sheep were grazing on a field of pale green, with so little regard for the laws of perspective that, between them, two appeared to have five legs.

Silvert was naively awaiting some compliment, some encouragement.

"A strange profession," Mlle de Vénérande went on, paying no more attention to the canvas, "because you really ought to lay bricks, it would be more fitting."

He laughed stupidly, a little disconcerted at hearing this stranger reproach him for using all possible means to earn his living. Then, just for the sake of saying something:

"Bah!" he said, "it does not keep me from being a man!"

And his open smock showed his golden curls.

A sharp pain shot through Mlle de Vénérande's neck. Her nerves were overexcited by the suffocating atmosphere of the garret. A kind of dizziness drew her to his naked flesh. She wanted to step backward, to escape the obsession, to flee. A mad sensuality seized her pulse! Her arm grew limp, and she put her hand over the workman's chest, as she would have put it over a blond beast, a monster whose reality she was trying to prove.

"I can see that," she said, with ironic daring.

Jacques shuddered, taken aback. What he had at first taken for a caress now seemed to him merely an insult.

The ladylike glove recalled his poverty to him.

He bit his lips and, trying to belittle himself, answered:

"Well, you know, I have them all over!"

At that coarse remark, Raoule de Vénérande felt a deathly shame. She turned her head away; and then, among the lilies, a hideous face, from which two sinister greenish lights shone, appeared: it was Marie Silvert, the sister.

For a moment, without faltering, Raoule kept her eyes fixed on those of the woman; then, haughtily, bowing imperceptibly, she lowered her veil and went out slowly. Jacques stood still, his lamp in his hand, never thinking of accompanying her.

"What do you think of that?" he said, regaining his composure, while Raoule's carriage, reaching the boulevards, was already on its way to the Avenue des Champs-Élysées.

"Well," Marie answered, with a leer, falling back upon her bed, where the brightness of the lilies accentuated the dirt, "I say that if you are not an idiot, it's a good thing. My dear, you've got her!"



## CHAPTER II

It was very cold. Raoule, hidden in the depths of her carriage, had lowered the blinds and was pressing her muff to her mouth.

Of course it was not the first time that this nervous young lady had seen a handsome young man, but the memory of that male, fresh and rosy as a girl, was pursuing her cruelly. With Raoule de Vénérande, mental activity almost always replaced positive action; when she could not live a moment of passion, she thought of it, and the result was the same. Not wishing to remember the sinister stairway in the Rue de la Lune, the dirty and sick flower maker, the garret filled with the awful smell of apples, she evoked Jacques Silvert.

Indifferent to the workman's low birth while abandoning herself to an imaginary affair, Raoule was dreaming of the flesh her fingertips had touched, and, with half-closed eyes, this descendant of the Vénérandes was drowning in a delightful languor. Her memory no longer provided the means of arousing her conscience. The shame she had felt before the man she had had the audacity to provoke to coarseness was succeeded by a mad admiration for the instrument of pleasure she longed for. She was already enjoying this man; she had already made him her prey; already, perhaps, she was taking him out of his miserable surroundings, in order to idealize him in the spasms of absolute possession. And Raoule, rocked by the quick trot of her carriage, was biting her furs, her head thrown back, her breasts heaving, her arms clasped. From time to time she gave a sigh of lassitude.

Neither beautiful nor pretty, as those words are generally applied, Raoule was tall and well built, with a supple neck. She had, like all truly well-bred people, a delicate figure, slender wrists and ankles, a rather haughty carriage, and that swaying motion, which, under a woman's clothes, shows the feminine structure. At first sight, her face, with its rather hard expression, was not attractive. Though beautifully formed, her eyebrows had a tendency to meet in the imperious line of a very uncompromising will. Her thin lips, shaded at the corners, attenuated the shape of her mouth in a disagreeable way. Her hair was brown, coiled at her neck, and added to the perfect oval of a face tinted with that Italian powder that pales in the light. Black and metallic under long curled eyelashes, her eyes became two burning coals when lighted by passion.

Raoule jumped, suddenly torn away from the depravity of her passionate thoughts; the carriage had stopped in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Vénérande.



"How late you are, my child," said an old lady, entirely clothed in black, who came down the steps to meet her.

"Do you think so, Aunt? What time is it?"

"It will soon be eight o'clock. You are not dressed, you have probably not eaten dinner. And Monsieur de Raittolbe is coming to take you to the opera tonight."

"I won't go, I've changed my mind."

"Are you sick?"

"Heavens, no. Upset, that's all. I saw a child fall under an omnibus in the Rue de Rivoli. I can assure you that I could not eat a thing. Omnibus accidents ought not to happen in the street."

Mme Elizabeth made the sign of the cross.

"Oh! I forgot, Aunt. Come with me. If anyone calls, I'm out. I want to speak to you about a subject you'll like much better, charity. I have happened upon a good deed."

They crossed the immense rooms of the mansion. There were drawing rooms with such a somber atmosphere that no one ever entered them without a tightening of the heart. The old building had two wings, flanked by rounded staircases like those at Versailles. The windows, with narrow panes, extended to the floor, showing behind them the lightness of chiffon and lace and huge iron balconies, ornamented with bizarre arabesques. In front of those balconies, cut by the entrance gate, was a very Parisian mosaic of plants, those plants of neutral green tints that resist the winter, forming such perfect borders that the keenest eyes could not see one blade of grass higher than the other. The gray walls seemed bored in each other's presence, and yet if a wizard, to annoy a devotee of the past, had turned around those walls with their coat of arms, he would have astounded the few churls lost in the spacious avenue. In the same way the niece's bedroom in the right wing, and the aunt's in the left, if opened suddenly to the gaze of the onlooker, would have given exquisite joy to anyone who appreciated pictorial contrasts.

Raoule's room was hung with red damasks and paneled around the openings with exotic woods. Weapons of all kinds and of all countries, exquisitely proportioned to the feminine wrist, occupied the central panel. The ceiling, rounded in the corners, was painted in rococo style against a blue-green background.

From the center hung a chandelier of Carlsruhe crystal, a garland of bluebells with lancelike leaves radiating and gleaming with their natural colors. A soft bed of carved ebony was placed across the mink carpet spread under the chandelier, and it had cushions whose feathers had been impregnated by an Oriental perfume that filled the whole room.



Several paintings, rather free in their subjects, were hanging on the walls. Opposite the work table, which was strewn with papers and opened letters, was a drawing of a male nude, with no shading along the thighs. An easel in a corner and a piano near the table completed the profane interior.

Mme Elizabeth, a canoness of several orders, had a room of steel gray, very sad to the eyes.

Carpetless, the well-waxed floor froze one's heels, and the thin Christ, hanging near a bed without pillows, was looking up at a ceiling painted with foggy clouds, like a northern sky.

Mme Elizabeth had been living for about twenty years in the Hôtel de Vénérande with her niece, who had become an orphan at the age of five. Jean de Vénérande, the last of the name, had, when dying, expressed the wish that the child, born of death, whom he left after him should be brought up by his sister, whose fine qualities he had always greatly esteemed.

Elizabeth was then a forty-year-old virgin, full of virtues, withered in devotions, spending her life as though under the arches of a cloister, lost in perpetual meditation, wearing thin the tip of her index finger from repeating the sign of the cross, which permits one to dip largely into the treasure of plenary indulgences; but she was scarcely preoccupied — a rare quality in the devout — with the salvation of her neighbors. Her story was a simple one. She told it on days of fasting, in the unctuous style that deep-rooted mysticism gives to passive natures. She had had a chaste passion, a passion in God; she had loved ingenuously an unfortunate consumptive, the Comte de Moras, a man who was dying every day of the year. Perhaps she had expected nuptial felicity and maternal joys, but an unforgettable catastrophe had spoiled everything at the last moment. The Comte de Moras had joined his ancestors, fortified by the last sacrament of the Church. In the extremity of her grief, the fiancée did not scatter her wedding roses or tear her white veil; at the foot of the saving cross she sought an immortal spouse. Her beautiful piety asked for nothing more! Mme Elizabeth was about to enter a convent when Jean de Vénérande died, but she silenced her heart and devoted herself to the upbringing of Raoule.

At that troubled moment of the girl's life when she was adolescent, a mother would have been gravely concerned for her future. The strong-willed little girl demolished all the arguments by which she was opposed with answers of an epicurean lightness. She brought to the realization of her caprices a terrible tenacity and charmed her governesses by the clear explanation she gave of her follies. Her father had been one of those



worn-out debauchés who blush at the work of the Marquis de Sade, but not from prudery. Her mother, a provincial full of energy and with a very strong constitution, had had the most natural and violent appetite. She had died of a hemorrhage, shortly after giving birth. Perhaps her husband had followed her to the tomb, another victim of an accident he had caused, since one of his old servants used to say that when dying he had accused himself of causing the premature death of his wife.

Mme Elizabeth, a canoness, ignorant of the life of materialistic beings, spent her time trying to develop mystical aspirations in Raoule; she left her to her own devices, spoke to her often of her disdain for vile humanity, in very well chosen terms, and let her reach her fifteenth year in the most absolute solitude.

At the moment of sensual awakening, her aunt Elizabeth, the canoness, would never have suspected that her prudish kiss did not satisfy the secret longings of the virgin entrusted to her pious care.

One day, Raoule, rummaging in the garrets of the mansion, discovered a book that she read by chance. Her eyes encountered an engraving, she turned away, but she took the book with her. About that time a revolution was taking place in Raoule. Her expression changed, her words became brief, her eyes became feverish, she laughed and cried at the same time. Mme Elizabeth grew uneasy and, fearing a serious illness, called the doctors. Her niece refused to see them. However, one of them, very elegant, witty, and young, was clever enough to be able to reach the capricious patient, and she begged him to come back, although there was no improvement in her condition.

Elizabeth had recourse to the help of her confessors. The true remedy was advised.

"Marry her," they said.

Raoule burst into a rage when her aunt broached the subject of matrimony.

That evening, during tea, the young doctor, speaking to an old friend of the family through a recessed window, said, pointing to Raoule:

"A very special case. A few years more, and that pretty creature whom you love too much, I think, will, without ever loving them, have known as many men as there are beads on her aunt's rosary. No happy medium! Either a nun or a monster! God's bosom or sensual passions! It would, perhaps, be better to put her in a convent, since we put hysterical women in the Salpêtrière! She does not know vice; she invents it!"

That was ten years ago before the day our story begins and . . . Raoule was not a nun.

During the week after her visit to Silvert, Mlle de Vénérande went



out frequently, having no other aim than the realization of a plan she had formed on her way from the Rue de la Lune to her home. She had confided it to her aunt, and the latter, after a few timid objections, had, as usual, recourse to heaven. Raoule had described to her in detail the poverty of the young *artist*. Who could fail to be moved at seeing Jacques's garret? How could he work there, with an invalid sister? Then Elizabeth had promised to recommend them to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and to send some charitable ladies, as titled as they were helpful.

"Let us open our purse, Aunt," Raoule had cried, carried away by her audacity. "Let us give alms royally, but let us do it with dignity. Let us put this talented painter [here Raoule had smiled] in truly artistic surroundings. Let him earn his living without his having the shame of receiving it from us. Let us make his future certain, right away. Who knows that later he may not pay us back a hundredfold!"

Raoule was speaking with conviction.

"My niece must have seen very great promise in those poor people to make her so enthusiastic, she who is usually so cold. Now here is a chance to make her more tenderhearted!"

Aunt Elizabeth did not know that her *nephew*, as she often called Raoule, when she saw her taking her fencing or painting lessons, had none of the faith that leads to a saintly life. But the canoness for her part was too well-bred, of too fine a family, to doubt for a moment the physical and moral purity of her niece. A Vénérande could only be a virgin. There were Vénérandes known to have kept their virginal quality through many honeymoons. This kind of nobility, although not hereditary in the family, set a standard that she felt her niece was obliged to maintain.

"Tomorrow," Raoule had finally concluded, "I'll look around Paris to find a studio. The furniture will be put in at night; we don't want to make people talk, and the least ostentation would be wrong. But Tuesday, when he brings my costume, everything will be ready. Ah! It is on such occasions, my dear aunt, that our money becomes interesting!"

"I leave you, my darling, to the celestial benefits of your charities!" Aunt Elizabeth declared. "Spare nothing; as you sow on earth, so you shall reap in heaven!"

"*Amen!*" Raoule answered — and smiled like an evil angel at the delighted canoness.

A week later Mlle de Vénérande, extremely beautiful in her costume of a *water nymph*, made a sensational entrance at the ball of the Duchesse d'Armourville. Flavien X, a fashionable journalist, said a few



discreet words about the strange costume, and although Raoule had no intimate friends, she discovered some that evening, who begged her to give them the address of the skillful flower maker.

Raoule refused.

### CHAPTER III

In the studio, Jacques Silvert, bewildered, sank down on the divan. He looked like a small child caught in a storm. Yes, he was set up in a home of his own, with brushes, paints, carpets, curtains, furniture, velvet hangings, a lot of gilt, laces. His arms hanging idle at his side, he looked around, almost expecting everything to disappear and leave him in the dark. His sister, incredulous, sat on the suitcase containing their poor clothes. Her thin back bent, her hands clasped, she repeated, in a tone of respect and veneration:

"The noble creature! The noble creature!"

She had not forgotten her eternal cough, like the creaking of a wheel needing grease, a theatrical cough with deep chest notes at the end of each attack.

"We ought to tidy up," she added, rising with great decision. She opened the trunk, took out the picture of the sheep against a clear sky and hung it in a corner. Then Jacques, moved by an inexplicable tenderness, came up to the picture and kissed it, crying:

"You see, sister, I always thought that my talent would bring us luck. And yet you told me that it would be better to run after girls than to do charcoal drawings on the walls."

Marie laughed and hunched her back.

"Well, as if your face wasn't as good as your beastly sheep!"

He could not help laughing; his tears dried up and he murmured:

"You're crazy! Mademoiselle de Vénérande is an artist, that's all. She pities artists, she is good, she is fair! Poor workmen would not make revolutions very often if they knew the women of the upper crust better."

Marie grinned wickedly but kept her opinion to herself. When she thought of that upper-crust woman, all the scenes of vice she had lived through rose in unhealthy fumes to her head, and then she saw the whole world as flat as her prostitute's bed had been a little while ago, after the departure of her last lover.

Philosophizing in a slow voice, anxious to be listened to, Jacques walked back and forth, scattering the armor, which had not yet been put up. He pushed all the armchairs against the wall, not having enough room to walk about and display his pride of ownership.



The easels of precious wood were heaped in the corner where a very shiny Venus de Milo stood on a bronze stand. He tried to count the busts and brought them to the feet of the goddess, as one piles up pots of mignonette on a grisette's windowsill. At times, he uttered little cries of pleasure, caressing the majolica urns and the shining foliage of a palm tree that emerged from an ottoman in the center of the studio. He even tried the stools scattered over the carpet; he tested them with his fists and threw them to the ceiling.

The window looked out onto the most open space of the Boulevard Montparnasse, opposite Notre-Dame-des-Champs. Its draperies were of gray satin, bordered with velvet, embroidered in black and gold. All the curtains were of the same hue and the Egyptian portieres, with their bright exotic designs, shone marvelously against the grays, the color of a spring cloud.

After an hour, the studio looked almost like the garret on the Rue de la Lune, without the grease spots or broken chairs; but one felt that they would soon be there. Marie decided that two iron beds should be put in the models' dressing room, for the studio had a semicircle with wide curtains, separated from the rest of the room by a Japanese screen lacquered pink and blue. They would dress as well as they could, and then the two beds could be hidden behind the screen. She even thought of using a vessel of beaten copper as a garbage can. They did not even think of raising the portieres, supposing that they were as much a part of the decorations as the old armor.

"We shall *wash* those saucepans," said Marie, full of her subject, "and have economical boilers. I adore *steam cooking*" — she was pointing to the Roman helmets that her brother was trying on from time to time.

"Yes, yes," Jacques answered, standing opposite the mirror that reflected and multiplied all the splendors of his paradise for him, "do what you like, without tiring yourself. It would be stupid for you to catch a fever again. We have other things to think of; make yourself at home, make soup on the sofas, if you want to. I am master, am I not? You know, I'll have to work. Flowers have spoiled my fingers. I'll have to get them back quickly. And then . . . portraits of her aunt, portraits of her servants if she wants them. I am not ungrateful. I think I would willingly bleed to death for that woman. There is no God, or else she is one. By the way, our clock is going to strike! Listen!"

The clock, a lighthouse surmounted by a luminous ball, struck six and suddenly the ball took fire, an opaline fire that made everything visible in a delightful shadow.

"It's not possible," Jacques exclaimed, astonished by this new phe-



nomenon. "Now is the time for light and the light comes of itself. I'm beginning to think that we are at a play given at the Châtelet Theater."

"Nothing but vice!" Marie Silvert muttered, answering her own bawdy thoughts.

"The clock?" asked Jacques, as naively as a child.

The fact is that the light did not go out and that the clock was spreading vice. The draperies were bathed in a faintly iridescent color, full of charming mystery. The Chinese Buddhas lifted their drapery-covered legs, the terra-cotta nymphs dissolved into a kind of floating vapor, and unapproachable, they opened living arms, they had human smiles, and the grotesque mannequins looked lustfully toward the chaste tunic of the Imperial Venus.

"Listen, give me forty sous. I am going to get a quart of wine and some Italian cheese, will that do?"

"Of course. I am dying of hunger!"

Jacques, in his enthusiasm, pushed her toward the door and soon her footsteps were heard faintly on the staircase. He threw himself on the huge divan behind the clock. His body was titillated by desire for the soft silk, as thick as wool, which covered most of the furniture in the studio. He lolled about, kissing the tassels and the upholstery, hugging them, his forehead against the cushions, following with his forefinger their Arabic designs, crazy with the madness of a fiancée faced with her trousseau, even licking the rollers, through their multicolored fringes.

He would have forgotten to eat, in his paroxysm of happiness, if a hand had not taken his masterfully and shaken him thoroughly. He jumped up, trembling, ready to hear the bitter sarcasms of Marie, the eternal grumbler. Then he recognized Mlle de Vénérande. She had entered noiselessly, expecting to catch the artist full of admiration before a statue. She had even supposed that the brushes might be at work, the canvas wet and a painting begun. She found a child clowning on new springs. At first it saddened her . . . then she laughed, and afterward she admitted that it was as it should be.

"Well," she said in the sharp tone of a mistress giving orders, "well, try to be reasonable, my poor Silvert! I have come to help you. I hope you have no objection."

She looked at him. "What about your working clothes? I thought that you would know how to look presentable!"

"Mademoiselle, my dear benefactress," he began, according to Marie's instructions, standing up and passing his hand through his hair. "This solemn day is the turning point of my life! I owe you fame, fortune . . ."



He stopped short, intimidated by Raoule's beautiful, bright black eyes.

"Monsieur Silvert," she went on, imitating his theatrical tone, "in my opinion you are a buffoon. You owe me nothing, but you have no common sense, and you'll be condemned, I am afraid, to too-stiff little sheep on too-green prairies. I am a year older than you, and I can paint a presentable nude in the time it takes you to make a peony. Therefore I can permit myself some very harsh criticism of your work."

She caught him by his shoulders and made him walk around the studio.

"See how disorderly everything is. Where is your feeling for the beautiful? Answer . . . I have a good mind to strangle you."

She threw her coat over an armchair and appeared erect, slim, her hair piled very high, in a black dress with a long tortuous train. No jewels brightened her almost masculine costume, except for the ring finger of her left hand, on which she wore a big cameo ring mounted on two lions' claws. When she caught Jacques's hand, again she scratched him. In spite of himself a sensation of terror overcame him. The creature was a devil.

She changed everything in a most cynical way. Jacques was scandalized and pouted. Nymphs leaned on the backs of Chinese satyrs, helmets covered busts, mirrors were placed upside down, reflecting the ceiling; ottomans rolled against the slim supports of easels and the trophies took braggart poses.

"We are lost," thought the flower maker of the Rue de la Lune.

"Now come, you'll have to dress yourself, and I doubt whether you'll be successful."

She was mocking him, thinking that nothing could be done with this plump young man. Then a portiere was pulled open and Jacques uttered a cry of surprise.

"Ah, I understand, you never thought of a bedroom, that's beyond your comprehension."

She lighted one of the wax candles ornamenting the torches and preceded him into a room decorated with pale blue silk. There was a bed with Venetian draperies, against a silver background, ornamented with Belgian lace. Raoule had given the decorators what remained of her summer bedroom. A dressing room with a bath of red marble was next to it.

"Go in . . . we'll talk through the door."

And they talked through the curtain of the dressing room, he floundering in the water, which he found cold, for the bath had been prepared for their arrival, and she laughing at his stupidity.



"But remember that I am a boy," she said. "An artist whom my aunt calls her nephew . . . and that I am acting toward Jacques Silvert as toward a childhood playmate. There, are you through? You'll find eau-de-toilette above the bath, a comb near it. Isn't he amusing? Isn't he funny?"

Jacques was amazed. High society after all must be much freer than the people he knew.

Growing bolder he made some rather improper remarks and asked her not to look at him, for naturally it would embarrass him.

He confided in her, telling how his poor father had died when caught in some machinery, in Lille, his native town, one day when he had drunk a little too much, how his mother had chased them out and taken another man. They had been very young, his sister and himself, when they had come to Paris. His abandoned sister knew so much already. They had earned their miserable bread with great hardship. He did not speak of Marie's acts of debauchery but began snickering to drive away a sadness that had seized him. Charity was being given them . . . how could they repay? It was very humiliating, and he forgot all about Marie's malicious advice while looking under the shimmering water at the scratches that the big ring had made.

At last there was a great noise in the bath.

"I have had enough," he declared, suddenly ashamed at owing her even his bodily cleanliness. He looked for a towel and stood glistening, his arms lifted. It seemed to him that someone was hugging the curtain.

"You know, *Monsieur de Vénérande*," he said in a grumbling voice. "Even between men that is not proper. You are looking! I wonder whether you'd be pleased to be in my shoes."

And he thought that she wanted to be ravished.

"She'll be sorry," he added in a very bad humor. His senses appeased by the bath, he put on a bathrobe.

Close to the floor, behind the curtain, Mlle de Vénérande could see him without having to move. The soft light of the candles fell upon his fair skin, as velvety as a peach. He had his back turned and he was acting the principal part in a scene of Voltaire, told in detail by a courtesan called Red Lips.

Worthy of the Venus Callipyge, the curve of his back, where his spine ended in a flourish, and rose firm and fat in two adorable contours, looked like a Paros marble with the transparency of amber. The thighs, less thick than a woman's, were still round enough to make his sex uncertain. His very high calves gave prominence to his bust, and the impertinence of a body unaware of its charms made it all the more



intriguing. The heel, very arched, had only one imperceptible point of contact, so rounded was it.

The elbows of his outstretched arms had two pink dimples. Beneath his armpits, and even lower, was curly golden hair. Jacques Silvert had told the truth, for he had curls everywhere, but he would have been mistaken, it is true, if he had sworn that they were the only proof of his virility.

Mlle de Vénérande went back to the bed; her nervous hands clutched the sheets; she was growling, as panthers do when the supple whip of the tamer has just struck them.

"The terrible poetry of human nudity, I understand it at last, I who tremble for the first time in trying to read it with blasé eyes. Man! At last, here is man! Not Socrates and the greatness of his wisdom, not Christ with the majesty of devotion, not Raphael and the radiance of his genius, but a poor man without his rags, and the skin of a menial. He is beautiful, I am afraid. He is indifferent and I am aroused. He is despicable and I admire him! And he, like a child in borrowed garments, surrounded by playthings that my caprice will soon take away from him, I'll make him my master and he will crush my soul with his body. I bought him, I belong to him. It is I who am sold. Passion, give me back my heart! Demon of love, you have made me a prisoner, stealing my chains and leaving me freer than my jailer. I thought I would capture him, and he has trapped me. I laughed at love at first, and now I am its victim. And since when does Raoule de Vénérande, whom an orgy leaves cold, feel her brain reeling before a young man as weak as a girl?"

She repeated the word: "A girl!"

Maddened, she jumped back to the portieres of the dressing room.

"A girl! . . . no . . . no . . . immediate possession, brutality, stupid drunkenness and forgetfulness. No, no, don't let my vulnerable heart share in this sacrifice to lust! Let him disgust me before pleasing me! Let him be what others have been, an instrument that I can break before becoming the echo of its vibrations!"

She pulled the drapery aside with an imperious gesture. Jacques Silvert had hardly finished sponging himself.

"Child, do you know that you are marvelous?" she said to him, cynically frank.

The young man cried out and picked up his dressing gown. Then, miserable, pale with shame, he let it fall passively, because, poor boy, he understood. Was not his sister cackling from a corner: "Go on, idiot, you who thought you were an artist. Go on, contraband plaything, go on, playboy, practice your trade."



That woman had drawn him from his garlands of artificial flowers, as one pulls out from real flowers the rare insect one wants to place, like a jewel, on a setting.

"Go on, animal of the tide! You can't be the friend of a girl nobly born. The depraved know how to choose!"

It seemed to him he was hearing all those insults humming through his head, and his virginal blondness took the same hue, while the points of his breasts, excited by the water, shone like two tiny rosebuds.

"Antinoüs must have been one of your ancestors, I think," Raoule muttered, pulling her arms around his neck and obliged by her height to lean on his shoulders.

"I never met him," the humiliated conqueror answered, bending his head.

Ah! All the wood he had cut for the wealthy, all the bread crusts he had picked up in the gutter, bravely facing his poverty, in spite of the perfidious advice of his sister, the prostitute! Her role as a worker played artfully, the little ridiculous tools tiring fate with their perseverance, where was all that? And how much more worthwhile! Honesty was not his strong point, but one could have been good till the end, leaving him his illusions and time to make a fortune to reimburse her some day.

"Will you love me, Jacques?" asked Raoule, shivering at the contact of his naked body, which the horror of his fall froze to the marrow of his bones.

Jacques knelt on the train of her gown. His teeth were chattering, and then he burst into tears. He was the son of a drunkard and a whore. His honor could only weep.

Mlle de Vénérande raised his head; she had seen those burning tears and had felt them falling one by one upon her heart, the heart she had tried to deny. The room suddenly appeared to be suffused with dawn, and it seemed to her she was breathing an exquisite perfume, thrown suddenly into the delightful atmosphere. Her whole being expanded, embracing at the same time all earthly sensations, and all heavenly aspirations, and Raoule, beaten but proud, cried:

"Stand up, Jacques, stand up! I love you!"

She pulled him away from her dress and walked to the door of the studio, repeating:

"I love him! I love him!"

She turned around.

"Jacques, you are master here. I am going away. Good-bye forever. You shall never see me again! Your tears have purified me and my love is worth your forgiveness."



She ran away, full of an atrocious joy, more voluptuous than the voluptuousness of the flesh, keener than unappeased desire, but more complete than sensual pleasure, mad with the madness of a first love.

"Well," said Marie Silvert quietly after she had left. "It seems the fish is hooked. Everything will go like a house on fire!"

#### CHAPTER IV

Marie, with the letter safe in her pocket, was firmly convinced now that the crazy woman could resist them no longer, that she would come back, that she would be calmer and more generous, and that new riches were sure to flow. Millions would settle upon the boy like jelly upon a cold beef stew; he would wear his Sunday clothes every day; she would trail moiré dresses around smelly kitchens. He would be called Monsieur, she Madame!

The letter had only a few misspelled words in blue ink, but it was very clear: "Come," Marie had written. "Come! dear mistress of your little Jacques . . . I long for you . . . we have spent the three hundred francs and I have had to send Marie to sell a vase with a serpent on it. It is sad to be abandoned so quickly after tasting of heaven . . . You understand me, don't you? I think I will be ill, and as for my sister, she is still coughing.

Your unquenched lover,  
Jacques."

And when she had finished this masterpiece, Marie, despite her brother's annoyance, started for the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. That idiot would never know how to act his part properly. Luckily for him she was placing at his disposal her experience of the human body, and she knew, on important occasions, how to arouse a lover.

It had been raining all day, a March rain, slow and penetrating; the mud was deep in all the gutters of the avenue. Marie, trying to economize, did not take a carriage and was soon splashed from head to toe.

When she reached the somber mansion, she wondered whether she would be thrown out as soon as she entered the hall. At the top of the stairs she found a big porter and a small dog. The first took the letter, the second growled.

"Do you want to see Mademoiselle or Madame?"

"Mademoiselle."

"Hey! Pierrot, there's a woman here who wants to clean the stairs," the porter shouted to a tiny valet passing through the hall. While this



was quite odd, the valet, in Mademoiselle's special service, made a face like a man who believes anything possible, especially on a rainy day.

"All right, I'll see. Wait here."

He pointed to a seat. Marie did not sit down but said coarsely: "I don't wait in antechambers. Do you take me for a retired charwoman, monkey face?"

Taken aback, the valet turned on his heel, and like a well-trained servant muttered:

"Someone with influence!" Under a republic clothes mean less and less all the time.

Mlle was in a boudoir adjoining her bedroom. When Mme Elizabeth was out, Raoule received her friends of both sexes in her own apartment. Her boudoir opened onto a conservatory, which she used as her study. When the valet entered, a man was pacing rapidly back and forth, while Mlle de Vénérande was stretched out in a rocking chair, laughing loudly.

"You are condemning me to hell, Raoule," said the man, who was still young and as dark haired as a Slav, though as light and graceful as a true Parisian. "Yes, you are driving me to hell, though I have deserved heaven. Laughter is no answer. My contention is that no woman can live without love, and you know that I mean by love the union of souls through the union of bodies. I am frank. I never wrap up a plain statement in pretty trimmings, as one disguises a bitter medicine with jam. I am speaking to you bluntly, as a soldier should, and when I see the ditch, I don't waste my time picking daisies. No, I use the spurs and charge, Raoule de Vénérande, my dear *fellow*! All right! Don't get married! But at least take a lover; it will be good for your health."

"Bravo! Monsieur de Raittolbe! But I'll bet that my health won't truly flourish unless my lover is a cavalry officer, dark haired, with frank speech, impertinent eyes, and a commanding voice."

"I admit it, I even go further. I propose the same officer as a husband. Take your choice! For exceptional services or forever. There are five of us who for the last three years have been madly courting you. Prince Otto, the musician, has gone mad and placed your full-length portrait in a mortuary chapel, where yellow wax candles burn around a magnificent bed... and he sighs there from dawn to twilight. Flavien, the journalist, passes a trembling hand through his hair whenever your name is mentioned. Hector de Servange, after the plain dismissal given him by your aunt, has gone to Norway to cool off. Your fencing master almost put one of his best swords through his body. And now that only your humble servant remains... having the honor to hold your stirrup



for your promenades in the Bois, I imagine you must look at him more favorably when he urges his candidacy. Shall we hide our friendship in a conjugal alcove? It will be warmer . . .”

Raoule had risen and was moving toward M. de Raittolbe when the valet entered.

“Mademoiselle, here is an urgent letter.”

She turned.

“Give it to me.”

“You’ll excuse me?” she added, turning to the officer who was breaking a Japanese plant in tiny pieces to appease his rage. He turned his back on her, too furious to answer. It was the thousandth time that this conversation had been interrupted at the most interesting moment. M. de Raittolbe, impatient, lit a cigar and smoked black a whole border of azaleas, swearing to himself that he would never come back to that hysterical woman. In his opinion anyone who did not follow ordinary rules must be a hysteric.

As she read the letter, Raoule grew pale.

“Heavens!” she muttered, “he wants money; I have certainly fallen into the gutter.”

“Have this poor creature sent up,” she went on lightly, “I shall give her what she wants at once.”

“And refuse me the explanation I want,” the officer grumbled to himself.

Raoule quietly closed the door on him, came back to her boudoir, and sat down as pale as death. She bent her head and dug her long nails into the crumpled letter.

“Money! No, I shan’t give in! I shall send him what he wants, instead of going to kill him! Is it his fault? Just because he has physical beauty, is that any reason why this man of the people shouldn’t be low? I am glad that this cup of bitterness has been offered to me. I won’t refuse it. On the contrary I shall gather new life from it.”

Marie Silvert’s racking cough made her turn her head. Raoule stood, threatening, and haughtier than a goddess speaking from Olympus.

“How much?” she said, smoothing out the immense train of her velvet dress.

Marie finished her fit of coughing. She had not expected that question so soon. Damn! things were not going so well, they ought to begin gently, with talk of love, tender questions. A caprice is handled like a stew, and the pepper is added at the last minute.

“Poor Jacques is lonely, you know,” she declared with a leering smile.



"How much?" Raoule repeated, seized by a blind anger, and looking around for a knife.

"Don't get angry, Mademoiselle. The child only mentions money as an excuse, for he really wants to see you. He is an unreasonable child, a very sensitive crybaby! He thinks that your crush is over, and he is miserable. No matter what I say it's no use. If you don't come to see him, he'll kill himself, I'm afraid. This morning, as he looked in his glass, he told me he would soon take poison. Poor darling! It's enough to break his heart! At his age, so fair, so white! You know how he is! So I put on my Sunday best. Don't let your brother die, I told myself, and here I am! As for money, we are poor but proud, and we can talk of that later!"

She rubbed her foot on the carpet, feeling secretly pleased at this chance to soil something belonging to the *upper crust*, and shook the old umbrella to which she clung. Raoule went straight to the cabinet just opposite her; with the back of her hand she thrust the woman aside, as one pushes away an old rag.

"Here are a thousand francs. I shall send you another thousand to-night, but go at once. I do not know your brother. I do not know where he lives. I don't know your name. Take this and go!"

She laid the notes on an armchair, motioned to Marie to pick them up, and rang the bell.

"Jeanne," she said to her maid, "show Madame out."

"Well!" the flower maker said, very much surprised.

She was taken away, almost carried away, by Jeanne. The porter pushed her into the avenue, while the small dog followed her down the steps and barked shrilly.

"Are you bored, Raittolbe?" Raoule asked smilingly, as she entered the conservatory.

"Mademoiselle," Raittolbe answered impatiently, "you are an agreeable monster, but studying wild animals is interesting only in Africa. So I shall say good-bye to you tonight and tomorrow I shall start for Constantine. I don't care who holds your stirrup for you."

"But I seem to remember that only a short while ago you offered me your name!"

Raittolbe clenched his fists.

"But why should I leave to hunt tigers!" he went on, not even listening to her.

"...That you asked me to marry you!..."

"When I can hunt a tiger in the park of the Vénérandes, a tiger decked out as an Amazon..."



"... Without asking my aunt or observing the rules of etiquette, sir!"

"... I am making myself ridiculous, Mademoiselle!"

"Yes, I think you are," Raoule added philosophically.

The Baron de Raittolbe was taken aback. They looked at one another a moment, then burst out laughing. Encouraged by this he seized her hands, and they sat on a divan in the greenhouse, a magnolia behind their backs.

"Listen to me — sincere love can never be ridiculous, Raoule. I love you sincerely."

He bent down, his mocking eyes filled with tears that were only due to nervousness, and not to the tenderness of which he wished to speak to her. Then he kissed her fingers one by one, looking up at her between each kiss.

"Raoule... I gave you my heart. I shall leave without taking it back, and since I have put it next to yours, I hope that you'll make a mistake. Two boys' hearts, two hussars' hearts of much the same red. Give me yours... keep mine... In a month we shall be hunting real lions in real Africa."

"I accept!" Raoule answered.

But her dark eyes, which did not know how to cry, looked mournful.

"What do you accept?" Raittolbe said, his heart tightening.

The young woman, with magnificent dignity, pushed away his outstretched hands.

"I accept you as a lover, my dear, and you won't be the first! You see, I am an *honest man*!"

"I knew it," Raittolbe replied gently, "and now I think I adore you!"

That evening the young officer dined with the Vénérandes. Toward Aunt Elizabeth he was the most courteous of knights. He made a speech about the devotion that blinds woman to human failings and raises her above this impure earth. Aunt Elizabeth admitted that the hussars were charming. As he took his leave, Raittolbe whispered in Raoule's ear:

"I am waiting..."

She whispered, "Tomorrow, at the Hôtel Continental. My brown carriage will enter the door on the left about ten in the morning."

"That's enough."

And the man about town went away at peace.

The next day the brown carriage was ordered about ten and Raoule entered it with feverish gaiety. It was to be thus, she had sworn it, and since *he* was, after all, better than the others, perhaps she would enjoy it more. An error of the passions is not the flowering of a great love, and merely the beauty of the human form is not capable of inspiring an eternity of mad attachment.



She sang as she buttoned her gloves. The mirror in the carriage reflected her image, her lace-covered bodice fitted well, and she was pleased to feel *womanly*.

"Does Mademoiselle want to drive?" said the coachman, turning around at the end of the short ride.

"No, just stop, and when I have left, drive in at the left and wait for me till this evening!"

Raoule's voice had grown shrill. She left her carriage and hurried off in a cab.

"Notre-Dame-des-Champs, Boulevard Montparnassel!" she ordered, as her carriage entered the driveway at the left.

During the drive she had not thought of the approaching sacrifice of her free body, but once face to face with it she had revolted. She had given in without demur.

The studio on the Boulevard Montparnasse seemed dismal when she arrived, but at the back she saw the bedroom, as blue as a corner of the sky. Marie Silvert left as soon as Raoule entered.

"Well," she said to herself, "we'll settle our little business after lunch, and I warn you, it will be pretty exciting, hussy!"

To isolate herself, Mlle de Vénérande undid the heavy portieres.

"Jacques!" she called sharply.

He hid his face in his pillow, unwilling to face this final humiliation.

"I did not write the letter!" he shouted. "I assure you, I would not have dared. Besides, I want to go away, I am sick. I have been made ill so that I have to stay in bed. Marie is capable of anything, I know her! You! . . . I can't bear you!"

Worn out, he covered himself with his bedclothes and curled up his body like a beaten animal.

"Really?" said Raoule, quivering with delight.

"Yes, really!"

He showed his tousled head, while his lovely fair complexion took a pinkish tint.

"Then why did you let her bring the letter?"

"I did not know! Marie told me I had fever, *her fever*. She gave me some drug and I was delirious every night. She said it was quinine; I would have stopped her, but I was not strong enough. Take away your damned studio! Oh, God!"

Out of breath, he tried to sit up, and Raoule saw something strange: he was wearing a woman's embroidered nightgown.

"Is it she who decks you out in this fashion?" Raoule said, touching the embroidery.



"Do you think I have any linen? It was all thrown away a long time ago. I was cold, and she put this on me. How do I know whether it's a woman's nightgown . . . or what it is!"

"Well, it is, Jacques!"

They looked at each other for a moment, wondering whether or not to laugh.

Marie shouted from the studio:

"Shall I lay the table for two?"

Then, willing to agree to anything if only she might be left in peace in her shame, which was beginning to intoxicate her, Raoule de Vénérande locked the door, while Jacques started to laugh heartily. Then she came back, hesitatingly, toward the bed. He had a stupid but very charming laugh, a childish, exciting, provoking, and thrilling laugh. She did not try to analyze the attraction behind that stupidity but let herself sink into it, as the drowning man, his struggles over, yields to the current and lets himself be carried away. She pulled aside the blue curtains that she might see his face in full light.

"You are sick?" she asked mechanically.

"Not since you came," he answered in a bragging voice.

"Do you want to give me great pleasure, Jacques?"

"I want to give you all the pleasures, Mademoiselle!"

"Then keep quiet. I don't come here to listen to you."

He was silent, rather hurt, saying to himself that doubtless his compliment had not sounded very new to this sophisticate. Society ladies are rather annoying in intimate relationships, and he realized that he had made a bad debut.

"I am going to sleep!" he declared suddenly, pulling the sheet up to his nose.

"Yes, go to sleep," Mlle de Vénérande muttered. On tiptoe she pulled the blinds, then lighted a night-light whose globe let a soft brightness penetrate the room.

From time to time, Jacques raised his eyelashes, and as he watched the discreet movements of this woman dressed all in black he was greatly embarrassed.

Finally, she came up to him with a small tortoise-shell box in her hand.

"I have brought you," she said with a motherly smile, "a remedy that is not at all like your sister's quinine. It will put you to sleep more quickly!"

She put her arm around his head and a silver spoon within reach of his mouth.

"Be good!" she said, looking somberly into his eyes.

"I don't want it!" he cried angrily.



He remembered a cheap book which he had bought upon the quays in a moment of recklessness, entitled *The Exploits of the Brinvilliers*, and the loves of great ladies always made him think of poisoning. Suddenly he thought of a picture in which a masked man in velvet was trying to poison a naked man. He saw the man pushing the cup away with a grotesque gesture. Raoule certainly wanted to get rid of him, for there are creatures who stop at nothing when they think they have compromised themselves. So Jacques clenched his fist, ready to strike her if she tried force. For an answer, Raoule bit the contents of the spoon with her teeth.

"I'm not a baby!" he said, surprised. "There's no need to chew things for me."

And without batting an eyelash he swallowed the greenish remedy, which tasted like honey. Raoule sat on the edge of the bed, holding both his hands and smiling, happy and unhappy at the same time.

"My love," she whispered, so low that she sounded to Jacques as if she were speaking from the bottom of an abyss, "now we shall belong to each other in a strange country that you do not know. It is the country of madmen, but not the country of brutes. I am taking away your vulgar senses and giving you others more refined. You shall see with my eyes, taste with my lips. In that country, dreams are the only life. You will dream, and you will understand, when I appear in your dream, all you don't understand when I am speaking to you now! Go! I shall keep you no longer and my heart shall join in your pleasures!"

Jacques, his head thrown back, tried to clasp his hands. He thought himself slipping little by little into a bath of feathers. The curtains grew liquid, and the multiplying mirrors in the room reflected a thousand times the silhouette of a woman in black, immense, hovering like a smoldering genie from the highest heavens. He stretched his muscles, tightened all his limbs, trying to return to the earthly envelope that was being taken away from him, but he was falling in deeper and deeper. The bed had disappeared, and so had his body. He went around and around in the blue and was transformed into a being like the hovering genie. Though he thought he had been falling, he found himself very much above the world. He had, without any possible explanation, the proud sensation of Satan, who, though he fell from Paradise, still dominates the earth and has, at the same time, his forehead under God's heel and his heel on the forehead of man!

It appeared to him that, glorying in a luminous nudity, he had been living thus for centuries with the woman in black.

In his ear mingled all the songs of a strange sexless love, giving the ultimate pleasure. He loved with an awful power and with the warmth



of a burning sun. He was being loved with a frightening passion and with such exquisite science that joy was always born again just when it seemed ready to disappear.

Infinite space opened before them, always blue, always dazzling, and down below, in the distance, an outstretched animal seemed to be looking at them gravely.

Jacques Silvert never knew how, during those moments of almost divine happiness, he had been able to rise. As he came to himself, he found that he was standing up, his heel digging nervously at the head of the big bear used as a rug. His eyes looked wildly into a Venetian mirror, and the room was full of silence. Behind the heavy portieres, a voice asked:

"Will you dine, Mademoiselle?"

Jacques could have sworn that it was only a minute ago that "Will you lunch?" had been asked.

He dressed hastily, moistened his temples with a sponge wet with vinegar, and stammered:

"Where is she? I don't want her to go away!"

"Here I am, Jacques!" a voice answered. "I have not left you yet, as you were delirious."

Raoule appeared, raising the curtain that hid the bathroom. She was very slim, very black, and her fingers were fastening the clasp of a necklace.

"It is not true!" cried Jacques passionately. "I was not delirious. I did not dream! Why do you lie to me?"

Raoule took him by the shoulders and made him shrink from her imperious pressure.

"Why does Jacques Silvert speak so familiarly? Have I given him permission?"

"Oh! I am tired out!" Jacques repeated, trying to stand up. "You ought not to mock a man so when he is sick. Raoule! Raoule! I love you! I think I am going to die!"

Rambling, frightened, he hid himself in Raoule's arms.

"Is it over?" he cried, "Is it really over?"

"I repeat to you that you dreamed. That's all."

And pushing him away, she reentered the studio, paying no more attention to him.

"Mademoiselle's dinner is served!" said Marie Silvert, bowing as if nothing could astonish her. Raoule went up to the table, on which a smoking dish stood, and, beside a rolled napkin, placed a pile of gold coins.



"This is his place, I believe?" she said very calmly, looking at Marie, who did not flinch.

"Yes, I put you opposite each other."

"Very well," replied Raoule, in the same expressionless voice, "I wish you, *both of you*, the best of appetites!"

And, putting on her gloves, she walked out.

## CHAPTER V

Raittolbe understood at last that Mlle de Vénérande simply sent an empty carriage to the rendezvous at the Continental, and was about to go away after an angry wait of nine hours, when a cab appeared at the door on the right side; Raoule stepped out of it, her veil hiding her face, a little uneasy, trying to see without being seen.

The baron hurried up, stupefied at her audacity.

He exclaimed: "Well, this is a little too much, a yellow carriage instead of a brown one and the right door instead of the left. What does this new hoax mean?"

"As I am a woman nothing ought to astonish you," Raoule answered, laughing nervously. "I do the opposite of what I promised. What can be more natural than that?"

"Yes, indeed, what can be more natural! A poor suitor is tortured, he is left to think of horrible things, accidents, betrayal, last-minute repentance, a family scene or sudden death, and then he is quietly told: 'What's more natural?' Raoule, you deserve to go to the police station, and yet I thought that Mademoiselle de Vénérande was loyal to an extreme! I am furious!"

"You were going to see me home," the young woman said, still smiling. "We'll dine without my aunt, who is plunged into a lot of nightly devotions, and while dining I shall explain to you..."

"Of course! You mock me, I am sure."

"Get in first, and I swear I'll clear up everything, for I deserve my reputation for loyalty. I could hide things from you, my dear friend, but I won't. Who knows!" And her face had such a bitter expression that it calmed Raittolbe. "Who knows if my story is not worth what you did not get today?"

He entered the brown carriage, very sulky, his mustache bristling, his eyes as round as those of a lion tamer intimidated by his pupil.

During the drive he did not begin any discussion; even the *story* seemed unnecessary since he was going to dine at Raoule's. He knew, and he was not the only one who knew, that in her home, Mme Eliza-



beth's niece remained an irreproachable virgin, a kind of goddess who allowed herself everything from a pedestal that no one dared upset. Accordingly, he was going to his martyrdom without enthusiasm. Raoule was dreaming with her eyes half closed, gazing through the night she had made around her, at a very white object with all the contours of a human body.

When they reached the mansion she had a table laid and taken into her library. An Etruscan lamp was put into the hands of a bronze slave, and she sat on the divan, asking the baron to take a comfortable arm-chair. All was done so gracefully that Raittolbe felt capable of strangling his hostess before touching the soup.

When the dishes had been put on two heated serving tables, Raoule told the footman that they would not need him anymore.

"Shall we be quite refined?" she said.

"Just as you like!" grumbled the baron in a low voice. A bright fire was burning in the emblazoned fireplace, decorated with tapestry figures, which took them back a few centuries, back to the time when the king's supper rose from the floor when he struck it with the handle of his sword.

A painting depicted Henri III distributing flowers to his minions. Near Raoule the enameled eyes of an Antinoüs crowned with vine leaves shone with desire.

Profane names could be seen along the hundreds of dark bindings of the books: Parny, Piron, Voltaire, Boccaccio, Brantôme; and amid the books stood a chest that hid between its velvet-lined shelves the unacknowledgeable ones and closed its doors, inlaid with ivory, on them.

Raoule took a ewer and poured herself a glass of pure water.

"My friend," she said in a tone full of forced gaiety and restrained passion, "I warn you I shall get drunk, because I can't tell my story in a rational fashion, for you would not understand it!"

"Very well!" murmured Raittolbe, "I shall try to keep my senses!"

And he emptied a whole bottle of sauterne into a chiseled goblet. They watched each other for a moment. Though very angry, Raittolbe was forced to admit to himself that Mlle de Vénérande had a face like the most beautiful of Dianas.

As for Raoule, she could not see her dinner partner. The intoxication of which she had spoken had already dimmed her eyes.

"My friend," she said brusquely, "*I am in love like a man!*"

Raittolbe jumped up, laid down his goblet, and answered in a strange voice.



"Sappho! Of course," he added, with an ironic gesture, "I suspected it. Go, Monsieur de Vénérande, go on, my dear *boyfriend*!"

Raoule sneered disdainfully.

"You are mistaken, Monsieur de Raittolbe; if I were a Sappho, I would only be like everybody else! My education bars me from the crime of boarding-school girls and the faults of prostitutes. I thought you knew that I am above the level of ordinary loves. How can you think me capable of such a weakness? Do not be afraid of the conventions. I am not easily shocked."

Raittolbe was trying to bend his fork. He could see that he had fallen head first into the sphinx's lair. He bowed deeply.

"What on earth could I have been thinking of? Ah! Mademoiselle, I was forgetting the *Homo sum* of Terence!"

"It is true, Monsieur," Raoule went on, shrugging her shoulders, "that I have had lovers in my life as I have books in my library, to know, to study. But I have had no passion, I have not written my book yet! I always found myself alone when we were two. One is not weak, when one remains master of one's self in the midst of the most stupefying pleasures. To present my psychological theme under a more . . . Louis xv light, I shall say that, although I have read a lot, and studied a great deal, I have always been able to see the shallowness of my authors, classical or otherwise! At the present time, my heart, that fiery scholar, wishes to show off and be like Faust . . . it is trying to rejuvenate, not its blood, but that old-fashioned thing called love!"

"Bravo!" said Raittolbe, convinced that he was about to witness magic, and that soon he would see a witch come out of the mysterious chest. "Bravo! I shall help you if I can! Ready at any hour, you know! I also am tired of the eternal chorus that accompanies very much over-rated actions. My little Faust, I drink to a new invention and I am ready to pay for the patent. By Jove! A new love! That suits me! And yet, Faust, it occurs to me that every woman, when she begins, must think that she has created love, because love is only old for us philosophers! It is not old for virgins, eh? Let us be logical!"

She moved impatiently.

"I represent," she said, taking a dish of shrimp from the heater, "I represent the elite of women of our time. A combination of the feminine artist and of the feminine great lady, one of those women who revolt at the idea of carrying on a weak race, or of giving a pleasure they don't share. Well! I come to your tribunal, sent by my sisters, to declare that we all want the impossible, because you love us so badly."

"You have the floor, my dear lawyer," Raittolbe asserted enthusias-



tically and in perfect seriousness. "Only I declare that I won't be both judge and defendant. Please put your discourse in the third person: *Because they love us so badly . . .*"

"Yes," Raoule went on, "either brutality or impotence, that is the dilemma. The brutes exasperate, the impotent degrade, and both are in such a hurry for their pleasure, that *they* forget to give us, the victims, the only aphrodisiac that could make them happy by making us happy: *Love! . . .*"

"That's right!" Raittolbe interrupted, nodding his head. "Love for love, the eternal aphrodisiac! Very pretty! I approve. The court is on your side!"

"In olden times," the pitiless advocate went on, "vice was sacred because born of strength; in our time it is shameful because born of our weakness. If one were strong, and if one also had grievances against virtue, viciousness would be permissible if, for example, one created a new vice. Sappho could not be a *prostitute*, for she was the vestal of a new fire. If I created a new depravity, I would be a priestess, while my imitators would founder, after my reign, in abominable filth . . . Don't you think that proud men, copying Satan, are more guilty than the Satan of the Bible who invented pride? Is Satan not respectable because of his unprecedented and divinely inspired sin?"

Raoule rose, greatly moved, her silver cup filled with pure water in her hand. She seemed to be drinking a toast to the Antinoüs who bent over her.

Raittolbe rose too, filling his goblet with iced champagne. More moved than a hussar generally is after his tenth glass, but more courteous than a rake would have been in the same circumstances, he cried:

"To Raoule de Vénérande, the Christopher Columbus of modern love . . ."

Then, sitting down:

"Lawyer, let us get down to facts, because I know that you are *in love like a man*, but I don't know why you have betrayed me!"

Raoule went on sorrowfully:

"I am madly in love! Yes! I want to raise an altar to my idol, though I know I'll never be understood! Alas! Can an unnatural passion which is at the same time a real love ever be anything but dreadful madness?"

"Raoule," said the Baron de Raittolbe effusively, "I am certain that you are mad, but I hope to cure you. Tell me the whole story. How, without imitating Sappho, can you be in love with a pretty girl?"

Raoule's pale face turned a flaming red.

"I am *in love like a man* with a man, not with a woman!" she replied,



while her darkened eyes turned away from the gleaming eyes of the Antinoüs. "I have never been loved enough to gain the desire of reproducing a being in the image of my beloved and I have never been given enough pleasure so that my brain has not had the leisure to seek better... I have wanted the *impossible*... I have it... That is to say — no, I'll never have it!"

A tear whose wet clearness seemed to have been stolen from Eden rolled down Raoule's cheek. As for Raittolbe, he shrugged his shoulders in utter despair.

"She is in love like a man with a man! Immortal Gods!" he exclaimed, "have pity on me! I think my brain is going!"

A moment's silence; then, very slowly, very naturally, Raoule told him how she had first met Jacques Silvert, how her caprice had grown to the proportion of a wild passion, and how she had bought a human being whom she despised as a man but adored as a *beauty*. (She said "beauty" for she could not say "*woman*.")

"Can such a man exist?" the bewildered baron muttered, carried away into an unknown world where inversion seemed natural and proper.

"He exists, my friend, and he is not a hermaphrodite, or a eunuch; he is a beautiful twenty-one-year-old male, whose feminine soul has mistaken its envelope."

"I believe you, Raoule, I believe you! And you won't be his mistress?" the rake asked, sure that the adventure could not end otherwise.

"I shall be his lover," Mlle de Vénérande answered, sipping her water and crumbling macaroons.

Raittolbe laughed heartily at that.

"Is this the invention I am ready to patent?" he asked.

A severe look stopped him.

"Have you ever denied the existence of Christian martyrs, Raittolbe?"

"Of course not! I have had other things to do, my dear Raoule!"

"Do you deny that virgins take the veil?"

"I yield to evidence. I have a charming cousin at the Carmelites of Moulins."

"Would you deny the possibility of being faithful to an unfaithful spouse?"

"As for me, yes, for one of my best comrades, no! Is the water you are drinking enchanted? You frighten me with your questions."

"Well, my dear baron, I shall love Jacques as a man loves his dead fiancée, hopelessly!"

They had finished dinner. A servant removed the table, and then, side by side, they lay upon the divan, each smoking a Turkish cigarette.



Raittolbe did not think of Raoule's dress, and Raoule was not in the least interested in the young officer's mustache.

"So you'll keep him?" asked the baron in a very matter-of-fact tone.

"Even if I ruin myself by it! I want *her* to be as happy as a king's godson!"

"Let us come to an understanding! If I am the chief confidant, my dear friend, let's stick to either *he* or *she* so that I won't lose the few shreds of common sense I have left."

"All right; *she*."

"And the sister?"

"A servant, that's all!"

"If the ex-flower maker has had lovers, *she* can have new ones?"

"Hashish..."

"By Jove it's getting complicated! Suppose, by any chance, hashish was not sufficient?"

"I would kill her!"

Raittolbe picked up a book haphazardly, for he felt the strange need to read aloud. Suddenly, amid the rising fumes of champagne, he seemed to see Raoule dressed in the doublet of Henri III, offering a rose to Antinoüs. A rumbling in his ears, a beating in his temples; and then, as he choked while reading the lines that danced before his eyes, he said things dreadful enough to make all the hussars of France blush.

"That's enough!" Mlle de Vénérande murmured dreamily. "Let me have chaste thoughts when I am thinking of *her*!"

Raittolbe rose and stretched, then came over to shake hands with Raoule.

"Good-bye," he said gently, "if I do not shoot myself first, tomorrow morning we'll visit *her* together."

"Your friendship will triumph! Besides, one cannot be really in love with Raoule de Vénérande!"

"Quite right!" Raittolbe replied.

And he left very quickly, because his head was growing giddy. Before going back to her room, Raoule went to see her aunt. She was kneeling on a monumental prayer stool and was reciting a prayer to the Virgin Mary.

"Remember, sweet Virgin Mary, that no one who prays to you has ever been rejected!"

"Has anyone ever asked her to change one's sex?" the young woman thought, while she kissed the pious old woman, sighing.



## CHAPTER VI

The introduction took place in front of an easel, on which stood a sketch of a large bouquet of forget-me-nots. Jacques was wearing his studio costume: flowing trousers and a flannel vest.

He had made a silk tie by pulling out one of the curtain loops, and, with lovely cheeks and clear eyes, he stood there, very much embarrassed by the visitor. The fabulous dreams of hashish, permeating his primitive constitution, had given him an awkward modesty, a shame that was revealed in all his movements. It was easy to tell from his languid air that these dreams were haunting his brain and that they left him uncertain of the reality of the fairylike existence he was being made to lead.

Raoule tapped him cavalierly on the shoulder.

"Jacques," she said, "let me introduce you to one of my friends. He loves good drawings, and you can show him yours."

Raittolbe, dressed in a tight-fitting riding costume, and wearing a soldier's high collar, was sniffing ungraciously. As he came in, he had said: "By Jove! What a sumptuous apartment!"

"Yes," he mumbled, scandalized now by the too-real beauty of the flower maker, "I draw too, but staff maps! Is Monsieur a painter of flowers?"

More and more confused, Jacques looked reproachfully at Mlle de Vénérande.

"I have done some sheep, shall I bring them out?" he asked, without directly answering the baron, whose riding whip embarrassed him.

This unexpected submissiveness sent a shiver down Raoule's spine, and she was only able to nod in acquiescence. While he was looking for his cartoons, Marie Silvert, draped in a flounced skirt, haughty, with cynical eyes, entered from the bedroom. She wore rings with imitation stones. She stopped short when she saw Raittolbe and, forgetting the *sacred* presence of the mistress of the house, cried:

"Heavens! What a smart man!"

Jacques burst out laughing, the baron gaped, and Raoule looked murderous.

"My dear, you ought to keep your admiration to yourself," said the ex-officer, pointing at Jacques. "There is someone here to whom you might give false ideas!"

That joke, in rather doubtful taste, was meant for Jacques, but Marie thought it was for Raoule.



Marie said humbly that she had not been brought up in a fashionable convent.

"Now that you are better," Raoule said, haughtily, "you must get yourself a room near the studio. It will be more convenient for ... Jacques! ..."

"Mademoiselle will be satisfied at once. Yesterday I took a small room on the landing and put an iron cot there."

Jacques was not listening. He was taking down the picture of the sheep, and the prostitute went out backward, repeating to herself: "What a good-looking man! God! What a good-looking man!"

The incident over, they busied themselves with the drawings of the young artist. In a detached manner, Raoule told how she had discovered that he had a lot of talent; with a few hours study in the Louvre, her lessons, the quietness of the isolated neighborhood where he lived, he would do wonders and later would be able to compete for the Salon prize. Jacques smiled with his flashing teeth. Ah, yes! The medal was a noble ambition. Thanks to his benefactress, he would become famous, he, the poor workman always out of a job!

He spoke slowly, for he wished to show Raoule that he knew how to act in good company. From time to time, he turned to Raittolbe, saying: "*n'est-ce-pas, Monsieur?*" so shyly that, however disgusted he had been when he arrived, Raittolbe soon felt an immense compassion for that disguised prostitute.

Raoule stretched out in an armchair, following Jacques's every movement; when she saw him accept a cigarette, she almost jumped up with rage. He was smoking slowly, like a child afraid of being burned, and he was trying to hold his cigarette as if he were accustomed to smoking.

"Jacques," Raoule asked, "is your fever gone?"

He put his cigarette down immediately. Then Raoule explained to Raittolbe she spoke familiarly to Silvert because she was older than he was and also because studying art made this familiarity possible between fellow students. The baron nodded his assent. After all, since they were traveling in the moon ... The setting of this monstrous affair was so truly oriental, the wretchedness of this low passion was so cleverly gilded, such a thick carpet had been laid over the filth, that he, the rake, was not anxious to lay it bare with the tip of his riding whip.

And, quite aside from the prostitute and the paramour, Raittolbe was compromising himself in the best of society. Although he had always been a gentleman till then, he *had caught his century*, a disease impossible to analyze but by this simple phrase. He would have preferred a different possession of Raoule than the knowledge of the secrets of her



private life; but after all, it is not unusual to have a beautiful mistress, but it is not always easy to be able to study, in the raw, a new depravity.

Slowly the conversation became animated. Jacques was won over by the baron's frankness; he said a few amusing things and became confidential.

"I'll bet that this boy, who has not the physique to be a soldier, has had many affairs with women instead?" Raittolbe ventured, winking.

"With his face! Of course!" Raoule said, playing nervously with one of her gloves.

"I swear I haven't," said Jacques, a little astonished that such a question should be asked in such a place. "If I have slept out ten times," and he winked back at Raittolbe, "that's all!"

Raoule rose to modify something in the drawing of the blue bouquet.

"No flirtations? No intrigues?" insisted the baron.

"Only the rich can be in love!" muttered the flower maker, suddenly losing his gaiety.

As he finished his cigarette, Raittolbe complimented Jacques on his talent, bowed to him, as one would bow to a woman in her home, with exaggerated respect, and then took his leave of Raoule, saying briefly:

"At the Italiens, this evening? . . ."

She shook her head, without turning around, and called to Jacques.

"Here, silly," she said, striking him with her torn gloves, "try to give some life to your unlucky forget-me-nots! You are too influenced by your old profession. You paint wooden flowers!"

"I shall begin all over again, for I am going to give them to your aunt."

"Well, if they are for my aunt, you can make them like marbles!" Raittolbe had gone.

"I forbid you to smoke!" she cried, shaking Jacques by the arm.

"All right! I won't do it again! . . ."

"And I forbid you to speak to a man here without my permission."

Jacques, taken aback, stood still, keeping his stupid smile.

Suddenly she dashed at him, and threw him down before he had time to struggle; then grasping his neck which his vest left bare, she dug her nails into his flesh.

"I am a *jealous man*!" she roared. "Do you understand me now?"

Jacques had buried his clenched fists in his tear-filled eyes and did not move. Raoule felt better because she knew that she was hurting him.

"You must feel," she said ironically, "that my hands are not those of a flower maker and that I am the better man of the two!"



Jacques did not answer, but looked at her out of the corner of his eye, smiling bitterly.

His feminine beauty was more apparent in his submissive attitude, and his weakness, perhaps voluntary, seemed to Raoule mysteriously attractive.

"How cruel you are!" he said in a low tone.

Raoule took a cushion and placed it under his red head.

"You drive me mad!" she stammered. "I want you for myself alone, and yet you speak, you laugh, you listen, you answer to another with the poise of an ordinary human being! Don't you see that your almost-supernatural beauty debauches the mind of all who approach you? Yesterday I wanted to love you in my own way without explaining my sufferings, but today I am out of my mind because one of my friends sat beside you."

She was stopped by raucous sobs and tried to hide her face with her handkerchief. On her knees beside his outstretched body, she burned with the ardor of a love that was communicated to Jacques in spite of himself; he sat up and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Then you love me very much?" he asked, cynically but charmingly.

"I love you unto death!"

"Will you promise to make me delirious all day long again?"

"Yes, you prefer delirium to my kisses!"

"No! . . . and your remedy won't intoxicate me again, because I shall spit it out if you force it into my mouth! This will be another delirium, a more satisfactory one."

He stopped, a little out of breath, surprised at having said as much, and then went on speaking in a tone of voluptuous ardor:

"Why did you come with the gentleman? Can't I be jealous too? You make me dreadfully ashamed! You bought me and you beat me . . . Don't you think that I can see things as they are? I don't understand. I ought to leave, but . . . your green jam has made me more cowardly than my sister! I am afraid of everything . . . and yet I am happy, very happy. I'd like to sleep on my nurse's breast . . ."

Raoule was kissing his hair, as fine and golden as tulle, trying to fill him with her monstrous passion. Her compelling lips made him bend his head forward, and she bit the nape of his neck.

Jacques started and shrieked at the pleasure of that pain.

"How wonderful that is!" he sighed, stiffening in the arms of his wild possessor; "I don't want anything else! Raoule, love me as you please, if you will only caress me thus!"

The draperies were lowered, and the muffled noise of the buses and



carriages passing in the street came through the double windows, like the distant thundering of an express train. The big divan against which Raoule had thrown Jacques and the cushions piled up behind them seemed like the padded compartment of a luxury train. They were alone, carried away by a swift and upsetting frenzy . . . they plunged into abysses and thought they were safe in each other's arms.

"Jacques," Raoule said, "I have made a *god* of our love. Our love shall be eternal . . . My caresses will never stop! . . ."

"Then you really find me beautiful? You really find me worthy of you, most beautiful of women? . . ."

"You are so beautiful, dear creature, that you are more of a woman! Look in the mirror, at your pink-and-white neck, like a child's neck! Look at your marvelous mouth like a wound in a fruit ripened in the sun! Look at the midnight in your deep, pure eyes . . . Look . . ."

She pulled him up, pushing aside with her feverish fingers his clothes on his chest.

"Don't you know, Jacques, that fresh and healthy flesh is the only power in this world! . . ."

He was aroused. His masculinity awoke with these soft words.

She was not striking him now, she was not buying him, she was flattering him, and man, however low he may be, always possesses, at some time or another, that ephemeral virility called *vanity*.

"You have proved to me," he said, encircling her waist with a bold smile, "you have indeed proved to me that I did not have to blush before you, Raoule. The blue bed is waiting for us, come!"

A cloud covered her scowling forehead.

"All right . . . but only on condition, Jacques, that you won't be my lover."

He laughed frankly, as he would have laughed if he had met an unwilling girl in a brothel.

"I won't dream this time. You don't want me to, wicked one! . . ." he said, escaping with the ease of a young deer.

"You will be my slave, Jacques, if one can call the delightful abandonment of the body slavery."

Jacques tried to drag her after him, but she resisted.

"Do you swear it?" she asked, in a compelling tone.

"What? . . . Are you mad! . . ."

"Am I master, yes or no?" cried Raoule, standing erect with hard eyes and distended nostrils.

Jacques moved back to the easel.

"I am going away . . . I am going away!" he repeated in despair, not



understanding his master's desires, and not desiring anything else himself.

"You won't go away, Jacques. You have given yourself away, and you can't take yourself back! Are you forgetting that we love each other?"

Now her love was almost a threat; so he turned his back on her, sulking, but she came up behind him, and folded him in her lascivious arms.

"Pardon!" she muttered, "I forgot that you are a capricious little woman, with the right, in *her* home, to torture me. Well! I'll do whatever you like..."

They went to the blue room, he, astounded by her demand for the impossible; she with cold eyes and biting her lower lip. She undressed herself, refusing all his advances. Without coquetry she took off her dress and her corset, behind a screen, thus preventing him from admiring her splendid, Diana-like figure. When he kissed her, it seemed to him that a marble statue had crawled between the sheets; he had the disagreeable sensation that a corpse was touching his own warm body.

"Raoule," he begged, "don't call me a *woman* again, it humiliates me... and you can see that I can only be your lover."

The sophisticate, on the pillows, shrugged her shoulders in a way that proved her complete indifference.

"Raoule," Jacques repeated, trying to warm with kisses the mouth that a while ago had been so passionate, the mouth of the one he believed would be his mistress. "Raoule! Do not despise me, I beg you... We love each other, you said so yourself... I am growing mad... I feel I am dying... There are things I will never do... never... before making you mine with all my heart!"

Raoule's eyes were closed. She knew that game! She knew word for word what nature would say with Jacques's voice.

How many times had she heard such cries, howls from some, sighs from others, polite advances from the seasoned ones, hesitating attempts from the shy ones? And though they had all shouted loudly, when they had obtained the realization of their dearest desire in time-worn phrase, they all were happily sated, equally vulgar after the appeasement of their senses.

"Raoule," Jacques stammered, exhausted from his distressing pleasure. "Do what you will with me now, I can see that depraved people do not know how to love!"

The young woman's body vibrated from head to toe when she heard the despairing cry of that man who was only a child compared with her. With one leap, she jumped on him and covered him with her wildly passionate body.



"I don't know how to love? . . . I . . . Raoule de Vénérande! . . . I know how to love, but I also know how to wait!"

## CHAPTER VII

A strange life began for Raoule de Vénérande, from the fatal moment when Jacques Silvert gave up his power as a lover and became hers to do with as she would, a lifeless object who let himself be loved, because his own love was powerless. Jacques loved Raoule with a real woman's love. He loved her with gratitude, with submissiveness, with a latent desire for unknown pleasures, with the passion one has for hashish, although he much preferred her to the green jam. The degrading habit she had taught him had become a necessity.

They saw each other almost every day, as often as Raoule's social obligations allowed.

When she had neither visits, nor soirees, nor studies, she would jump into a cab and go to the Boulevard Montparnasse, the key to the studio in her hand. She would give some brief orders to Marie, and often a royally filled purse, and then she would shut herself in their temple, isolated from the rest of the earth. Jacques very rarely asked to go out. When she was not there he worked or read all kinds of books, scientific or literary, whatever Raoule gave him to charm his primitive mind.

He led the lazy existence of the Eastern women, confined to the harem, who know nothing except love and for whom love is everything.

Sometimes his sister made scenes over his passiveness. She would have liked him to have a household, other mistresses, and the desire to waste the wealth of the sinner. But he, always calm, declared that she could not know and could never know.

And the heavy draperies kept Marie from looking through the key-hole. She was obliged to remain a stranger to the mysteries of the blue room. Raoule came and went, commanded, acted like a man accustomed to affairs, though never before in love. She forced Jacques to bask in his passive happiness like a pearl in its setting. The more she forgot her sex, the more she multiplied the occasions for him to be feminine, and, so as not to frighten too much the male she wanted to smother, she tried various degradations on him jokingly at first, and later made him accept them seriously. Thus, one morning she sent him an enormous bunch of white flowers by her footman, with this note: "I picked this perfumed armful of flowers for you in my greenhouse. Don't scold me, for I send flowers instead of kisses. A fiancée could not do better!"

Jacques grew very red when the flowers arrived, but he placed them



in the vases about the studio, playing a comedy to himself, being a woman for the sake of art.

At the beginning of their relationship, he would have felt grotesque. With the excuse that he wanted to breathe some fresh air, he would have gone out, would have taken a glass of beer at a neighboring bar, with salesmen and casual laborers.

Raoule knew at once the difference she had wrought in that weak character, when she saw the way her bouquet had been arranged, and every morning thereafter her footman left with Jacques's concierge, immaculately white flowers.

Why immaculately white?

Jacques did not ask. One day, toward the end of May, Raoule ordered a closed carriage and took Jacques for a drive in the Bois.

He was as happy as a schoolboy on a holiday, but he enjoyed this unusual favor very discreetly. He stayed close to her in the carriage, his head on her shoulder, repeating sweet nothings that rendered his beauty still more provocative.

With her forefinger, through the closed window, Raoule pointed out to him the principal people passing. She explained to him the terms of society life she was using and told him of the life she led, a life that appeared forbidden to him, a poor monster without a conscience.

"Ah!" he would often say, cuddling up to her, frightened, "some day you'll marry and you'll leave me!"

These words gave him, so fresh, so blond, the touching charm of a seduced young woman, who foresees the possibility of being forgotten.

"No, I shall never marry!" Raoule asserted. "No, I won't leave you, Jaja, and if you are good, you'll always be mine!"

They both laughed, but they were more and more united in a common thought: the destruction of their sex.

Jaja, however, had caprices, attainable ones. He disappointed his sister, whose hopes were much above the clothes-filled studio. He had asked for a pretty dressing gown of blue velvet, lined with blue... and it was with heels tripping in the train of this garment that he greeted Raoule. She came once, about midnight, dressed like a man, a gardenia in her buttonhole, her hair hidden in curls, a top hat, her riding hat, low on her forehead. Jacques had fallen asleep reading while waiting for her, and the book had slipped from his fingers. The night-light shed a mystic glow over the bed of silky brocade, ornamented with Venetian lace. His tousled hair lay on the fine line of the sheet with a charming abandon. His soft shirt revealed nothing masculine, and his rounded, hairless arm shone like beautiful marble on the satin bedspread.



Raoule looked at him for a minute, wondering with a kind of superstitious terror whether she, godlike, had not created a human being in her own image. She touched him with the tip of her glove, and he awoke, stammering a name; but, seeing this young man standing beside his bed, he jumped up, shouting in fear:

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Raoule took off her hat with a very respectful movement.

"Madame sees before her the most devoted of her adorers," she said, curtsying.

For a moment he hesitated, with astonished eyes, looking at her patent leather boots and her short brown curls.

"Raoule! . . . Raoule! . . . Is it possible? You'll be arrested! . . ."

"Nonsense, foolish little one! Because I come in without ringing the bell?"

He held out his arms, and she smothered him with passionate kisses, stopping only when she saw him ready to swoon, beside himself, begging for the last realization of an artificial happiness, which he endured as much from a need for peace as for the love of the sinister courtesan.

He quickly grew accustomed to the nightly disguise, thinking that Mlle de Vénérande had the right to dispense with wearing a dress if she chose.

Since he had a very vague idea of the life of the *upper crust*, as his sister often called them, he never imagined what efforts Raoule had to make to leave her home without being noticed.

Aunt Elizabeth went to bed at eight o'clock when there were no receptions, but after tea on Saturday all the servants went back and forth from the hall to the drawing room. So that Raoule, in order to leave her room by the servants' stairs had to take the most minute precautions. However, one evening when the big chandelier in the drawing room had just been put out, as Raoule started down, she met a man who was lighting his cigar. To go back was to lose her opportunity, to go out was to run the risk of betraying herself . . . She went on, passing by the man, who touched his hat, looking at her very attentively.

"One word, sir," the late one murmured, touching her shoulder. "Will you give me a light?"

Raoule had recognized Raittolbe.

"Well," she said, looking haughtier than ever, "so you haunt the chambermaids' quarters?"

"What about you?" the ex-officer answered, very much piqued.

"That's none of your business."

"Yes, it is," he replied, "because one can also reach this way, I believe, the apartments of a lady for whom I have the deepest respect. Made-



moiselle de Vénérande's room is above us. I shall give you my explanation in return for yours. Mademoiselle Jeanne's face lured me here. It is stupid, but it is true . . . Your turn now."

"Such impertinence," said Raoule, trying to hide her laughter.

Raittolbe quickly threw his card and his cigar in Raoule's face, and she burst out laughing in spite of the danger. Then she took off her hat and turned her beautiful face to her interrogator.

"Well, for heaven's sake!" Raittolbe grumbled, "that's a disguise I wasn't expecting!"

"I'll take you with me!" Raoule replied.

And they went to the coach that was waiting in the avenue. Raittolbe lamented the depraved who spoil the best. He declared that Jacques looked to him like a parcel of rotten flesh. And as for his sister, she was right in loving handsome young men, for she was only living up to the rules of her union. And as he grumbled and swore, he drove toward the Boulevard Montparnasse, while Raoule, seated behind him, laughed heartily. They arrived very late.

A woman appeared to be silently waiting for them, opposite Notre-Dame-des-Champs.

There were very few people in the street at such an hour, and she was obviously a streetwalker.

"Will you come up to my place? The gentleman with the decoration, I mean. I am as nice as any other, you know," the prostitute said, addressing herself to Raittolbe.

She was wearing a silk dress, covered with a Spanish mantilla held by a coral comb. Her eyes were shiny with promises, although a hollow cough had interrupted her sentence.

"So it's you," exclaimed Mlle de Vénérande, raising her riding whip with one hand and seizing Marie's arm with the other.

Marie Silvert, seeing that she was recognized by the master of the house, tried to take back what she had said.

"Excuse me," she stammered, "I thought you were some acquaintances of mine; please don't think badly of me, for I also know some people of the upper crust."

Raoule struck Marie impetuously on the temple, and since the riding whip had a round, agate handle, Marie Silvert fell unconscious to the pavement.

"Oh, hell!" said Raittolbe, exasperated. "You might have restrained yourself, my young fellow; we'll be taken to the police station, true enough! Besides, you are illogical. If you are coming down in the world, this girl is going up. Punishment was useless."



Raoule shivered.

"Hush, Raittolbe! My passion has nothing to do with this low female. I should have thrown her out long ago."

"I don't advise you to try!" the ex-officer replied dryly.

He picked Marie up, slung her across his shoulder, and before the police arrived they had her in the house.

Raoule, not worrying about how the adventure might turn out for Raittolbe, let him enter the sister's room while she went to the brother's. Jacques was not in bed, for he had heard shouts in the street.

He ran up to Raoule and put his arms around her neck, as an anxious wife would have done.

"Jaja's sad," he declared, in a tone whose naïveté was belied by his cheeky smile.

"Why, my treasure?"

And Raoule almost carried him to the nearest armchair.

"I thought you were being arrested; there was a dispute, I think, underneath my window."

"No, it was nothing! By the way, you had not told me that your esteemed sister is not satisfied with the comfort I give her. She accosts passersby on the boulevard at one o'clock in the morning."

"Oh!" said Jacques, scandalized.

"Taking me for someone else a short while ago, she allowed herself..."

Such an idea would have amused the flower maker three months before, but now it infuriated him.

"The wretch!" he said.

"You will allow me to suppress Mademoiselle Silvert, won't you?"

"You are justified! So she made advances..." he said in a jealous tone.

"It is quite obvious that I must look like a serious... client, as such ladies say!"

And Raoule put down her coat with masculine ease.

"And yet," Jacques sighed, "one thing will always be missing."

She sat at his feet on a low stool, plunged in mute adoration. He wore his velvet dressing gown tied around his waist with a silk cord, and his shirt, with an embroidered front, had just enough collar to avoid being completely feminine. His hands, of which he took great care, were as beautifully white as a woman of leisure's; on his red hair he had sprinkled brilliantine.

"You are divine!" said Raoule. "I have never seen you so beautiful!"

"I have a surprise for you. We shall have supper! I have ordered champagne, and I have decided to tease you!"



"Really?"

He pushed away the Chinese screen and uncovered a table laid with two bottles of champagne on ice.

"There!" he said, "I even want to make you drunk!"

"So, Mademoiselle is at home!"

Just then someone knocked at the door.

"Who is there?" asked Jacques, very much annoyed.

"I!" Marie answered. And, when they had unbolted the door, she entered, very pale, her mantilla torn, some blood on her cheek.

"My god! What is the matter?" Jacques cried out.

"Oh, nothing," the woman said in a raucous voice. "Madame almost killed me, that's all!"

"Killed you!"

"Be calm!" said Raoule contemptuously. "There must be a doctor in the neighborhood; have him fetched by the concierge or by Monsieur de Raittolbe, if he is not already gone."

"I am here," the latter said, appearing and signaling to Raoule, who remained quiet.

"Explain yourself," muttered Jacques, pouring out a glass of champagne for his sister and making her sit in an armchair.

"Well, here you are, my dear. That whore you love the wrong way beat me up, pretending that I was soliciting at the door. Apparently we are not in our own home! She wants to be the only one to make a night of it, think of that! She has to meddle with poor women who have different tastes than hers. She thinks she's the vice police, ticketing prostitutes and beating them. But in spite of this gentleman's honesty" — and she pointed to the baron who was making desperate signs to Raoule — "I shall settle with her at once. I don't care a bit about your dirty love affair, but as long as we are rabble together, we can just get a little rough with each other before we part company, eh!"

Spluttering out those words, which made as much noise as pistol shots in the magnificence of that room, the streetwalker pulled up her sleeves and, rising, stood in front of Raoule.

She was completely drunk. When her breath flew into Mlle de Vénérande's face, it seemed to Raoule that a bottle of alcohol was being spilled over her.

"Miserable wretch," Raoule roared, searching her pockets for the dagger that she always carried.

Raittolbe thrust himself between them, while Jacques held his sister.

"That's enough!" said Raittolbe, who wished he were a hundred miles away from the Boulevard Montparnasse. "You are very ungrateful,



Mademoiselle Silvert, and moreover, you are not in your right senses. Please leave!"

"No," shrieked Marie, absolutely beside herself, "I want to tear the hussy to pieces before I go away. She disgusts me, I tell you."

Dismayed, Jacques kept trying to push her outside.

"You also," she yelled, "deny your sister, you dirty trollop!"

Jacques became as pale as death; and slowly, without answering, he walked to his room, and let the portiere fall behind him. At last, Raittolbe, his patience exhausted, seized Marie bodily and, in spite of her struggles and furious cries, carried her to her room, and locked her in; then he came back to Raoule.

"My dear friend," he said, trying not to look at her, "I think this scene ought to give you food for thought; this creature, however low she may be, looks very dangerous to me . . . take care! If you dismiss her, in two days the whole of Paris will know the story of Jacques Silvert."

"Will you, instead of that, help me to crush her?" Raoule asked, pale with rage.

"My dear child! You don't know what a real female is like. You couldn't possibly change her. I promise to calm her, that's all!"

"How?" asked Raoule, frowning.

"That's my secret; but rest assured that your friend knows how to sacrifice himself."

Raoule drew back, revolted; she understood.

"One must do what one must do," said Raittolbe.

And he left, in a very dignified manner.

## CHAPTER VIII

"Since we are rabble together," Marie Silvert had said. All night long these words kept Raoule from loving. All the souvenirs of Greek stateliness with which she surrounded her modern idol were suddenly pushed aside like a veil exposed to the wind, and revealed to the daughter of the Vénérandes the existence of ignoble things that she had never suspected. In love all women are alike . . .

. . . The honest wife, at the moment she gives herself to her legal husband, is in the same position as the prostitute when she abandons herself to her lover.

Nature has made the victims naked and civilization gives them only clothes. Without clothes there are no differences, except in physical beauty; there, sometimes, the prostitute wins.

Christian philosophers have spoken of purity of intention, but they



have never mentioned that last moment during the amorous struggle . . . At least we don't think so! They would have found it too distracting.

Raoule saw herself on a level with the ex-prostitute . . . and, if she had the superiority of beauty, she did not have that of pleasure. She gave pleasure, but she did not have any.

All monsters have their fits of depression, and she was tired . . . Jacques cried.

At dawn, she left the studio, took a cab, and went back to her mansion.

While waiting for breakfast, she fenced with one of her cousins, a stupid snob, who looked well while fencing, and then she discussed with her aunt the prospects of their going away. Raoule thought they should leave at once, before the season ended. The canoness answered that she had charity visits to pay, farming accounts to settle, and a cook to replace. Wealth is sometimes very trying, society very boring, and the world is full of tribulations.

However, the modern Sappho could not yet condemn herself to death. A piercing pain from the depths of her being warned her that her idol had feet of clay. Like an inventor who is stopped by some small obstacle on the threshold of perfecting his discovery, she hoped, in spite of the filth, to see in Jacques's bright eyes another corner of her sky, which she could fill with dreams.

Three days went by. Jacques did not write, Marie did not come, and, as for Raittolbe, he kept absolutely neutral. One evening Raoule, exasperated by the uncertainty, put on her masculine garments and rushed to the Boulevard Montparnasse. As she entered, she met Marie Silvert, who greeted her with a servile smile, without showing in her attitude anything that might recall what had happened between them. Jacques was making elaborate initials on note paper. Raoule had ordered him to do so, and had paid him in advance with passionate kisses.

A delightful calm reigned in the studio, and the light of the lamp with its lowered shade fell only on Jacques's adorable face. It was not the face of a low person; everything in his features indicated rather the candor of a young virgin thinking of the priesthood. Uneasy when he saw Raoule, he laid down his pencil and rose.

"Jacques," said Raoule quietly, "my friend, you are a coward."

Jacques fell back into his armchair, deathly pale.

"Your sister's epithets the other night were foul but justified."

He grew still paler.

"You are kept by a woman, you work only to have something to do, and you accept an infamous position without any struggle whatsoever."



Frightened, he looked up at her.

"I think," Raoule went on, "that it is not Marie whom I should dismiss as a vile creature."

Jacques clasped his hands to his breast, for he was suffering.

"You shall leave here," Raoule added coldly, "you shall go and seek work from an engraver. I shall help you to find it, and then you'll go back to your garret and try to become a man."

Jacques rose again.

"Yes," he said, brokenly, "I shall obey you, Mademoiselle. You are right."

"On that condition," Raoule went on, more gently, "I promise you a reward you have never dreamed of."

"What, Mademoiselle?" he asked while putting his tools in order on the cover of his rosewood desk.

"I'll make you my husband."

Jacques drew back, raising his arms.

"Your husband?"

"Of course! I ruined you, and I shall rehabilitate you. Nothing simpler! Our love is only a degrading torture to which you submit because I pay. Well, I give you back your freedom. I hope that you'll know how to use it to win me all over again . . . if you love me."

Jacques leaned on the easel that was at his back.

"Well, I refuse," he said bitterly.

"What! You refuse to marry me?"

"I refuse to rehabilitate myself, even at that price."

"Why?"

"Because I love you, as you have taught me to love you . . . because I want to be a coward, because I want to be vile, and the torture of which you speak is my life now. I shall go back to a garret; if you want it, I shall become poor again, I shall work, but when you want me, I shall still be your slave, the one you call: my wife!"

A thunderbolt would not have upset Raoule more.

"Jacques! Jacques! Don't you remember our first embraces, then? Think of it! To be my husband; you, the workman who was plunged in poverty, will be a king!"

"Well!" Jacques muttered, two big tears in his eyes, "it's not my fault if I don't feel equal to it anymore!"

Raoule ran to him with open arms:

"Oh! I love you," she cried voluptuously. "Yes, I am mad; I even imagine that I just asked you something unnatural . . . Dearest darling . . . Forget it, you are better than I thought."



She led him to the divan, and as she often did, took him on her knee. They looked like two brothers who had made up their quarrels.

"I would, indeed, look pretty dressed in white, the veil of a chaste spouse on my forehead... I who hate to be ridiculous... But, look here, you seriously mean, darling idiot, that you don't care for the idea at all?"

Jacques was sobbing, his head on Raoule's breast.

"No, I assure you, it is the end. I'll take what you want to give me, and if we had to change at certain moments, I would refuse. However, if you knew how much I love you, you would not insult me, you would pity me greatly. I am very unhappy."

She hugged him tightly, calming him as one does a babe in arms. Her triumph, against her own conscience, intoxicated her. The coarse insults of the vile woman no longer rang in her ears. Again Greek memories veiled her idol in a cloud of incense. Now she was loved through love of vice; Jacques was becoming a god.

She dried his tears and asked him about his sister.

"I don't know anything about the life she leads," he replied, in a sulky voice. "She is always out, and in the evening she is always expecting someone. I think it is the baron you introduced to me one day."

"Impossible," Raoule exclaimed, bursting into laughter. "Raittolbe lowering himself to that extent! After all, she is free, and so is he, but I forbid you to worry about it."

"You forgive her for the scene she made the other day? You know she was drunk..."

"I forgive her everything, since, indirectly, she is the cause of the talk we have just had. I'd go to hell, if I thought I could find there the proof of your sincere love, darling Jacques!"

He lay at her feet and kissed them with passionate humility... then he sighed:

"I am sleepy," and put on his forehead the high heel of Raoule's shoe. She made him get up, for she understood.

That night Raoule, who had to go to a hunt the next day at the Duchesse of Armonville's, near Fontainebleau, left about one, leaving Jacques sound asleep.

She was on her way downstairs, when Jacques's door was opened cautiously: a man in his shirt sleeves invaded the blue room, which he explored in a glance.

"Monsieur Silvert," he said then, sure that he and Jacques were alone, "Monsieur Silvert, I wish to speak to you; get up and let us go into the studio."



It was the Baron de Raittolbe; his disheveled appearance showed that he had not left the other half of his clothes very far away. He seemed very much annoyed to find himself there, but an indomitable will shone under his thick black eyebrows. He was thoroughly revolted by all he had seen and heard. In this sad situation, he thought that his influence as a truly virile man should make itself felt. Since he had become involved in the affair, he would, at least, try to slow things down.

"Jacques!" he repeated aloud, approaching the bed.

The night-light fell on the rounded shoulders of the sleeper and followed the line of his body caressingly.

He had fallen naked and exhausted on the crushed bedspread, whose blue satin showed his complexion to advantage. His head was hidden in his arm, which was so white that it had mother-of-pearl tints. In the hollow of his lower back a golden shadow emphasized the fullness of his buttocks, and one of his legs, drawn apart from the other, was twitching as a nervous woman's does, after a too-prolonged excitation of her senses. He had two gold bangles around his wrist, set with diamonds, which sparkled on the azure sheets beneath him, and a bottle of attar of roses, open on the pillow, emitted a perfume as voluptuous as all the loves of the Orient.

The Baron de Raittolbe, standing before this disorderly bed, had a strange hallucination. This ex-officer of the hussars, this brave duelist, this jolly rake, who held in equal esteem a pretty girl and a bullet from the enemy, lost his bearings for a half second: the blue that was all around him became red, his mustache stood on end, his teeth clenched, a shudder convulsed his body, and he broke out with cold perspiration. He was almost frightened.

"I'll be damned if it isn't Eros himself," he muttered.

And, like an amateur who had been interested in the procedure of military examination, he traced the sculptured outlines of the warm, voluptuous flesh with his eyes.

"Now's the time to get my riding whip," he added, trying to shake off his admiration.

"Jacques!" he roared, loudly enough to shake the room to the ceiling.

Jacques rose; but, however roughly he had been awakened, he was beautiful in his astonishment; his arms fell gracefully, and he remained superb in his impudicity, like an antique marble.

"Who dares," he said, "to come in without knocking?"

"I do," the baron answered, enraged, "I do, my dear young scoundrel, because I want to talk to you about a few interesting things. I knew



you were alone, so I passed the threshold of the sanctuary. I give you a minute to make yourself decent."

And he went out while Jacques, jumping out of bed, looked with trembling hands for his dressing gown.

The weather was sticky, it was August and a storm was in the offing. Raittolbe opened the windows of the studio and plunged his forehead into the air, hotter than Jacques's bed. He felt as though he were on fire.

"At least it is a natural fire," he thought.

When he turned around, the young painter was waiting for him, wrapped in the folds of an almost feminine garment; his pale face in the darkness looked like a statue's.

"Jacques," the baron said in a dull voice, "is it true that Raoule wants to marry you?"

"Yes, sir, but how do you know?"

"What does that matter to you! I know it, that's enough; I even know why you refused. It is very noble of you to have refused, Monsieur Silvert," and Raittolbe laughed contemptuously. "Only after that worthy and dignified effort you should have retired completely from Mademoiselle de Vénérande's sun."

Jacques, completely fatigued, was wondering what the sun had to do with his marvelous night and what this disagreeable man could want from him.

"But, Monsieur," he muttered, "what right have you?"

"Damnation!" exclaimed the baron, "the right that any man of honor, knowing what I know, would take when he has to deal with a scoundrel of your sort. Raoule is mad, and her madness will disappear, but if during the crisis she married you, you would not disappear! It would be disgusting. I have done all that is possible so that our world should not know anything of this scandal, but you'll have to do the impossible so that it will cease altogether; this secrecy cannot last forever. Your sister may get drunk again, and if she does, I give up. Tonight, you were almost right. Well, what prevents you from leaving this apartment tomorrow, going to a garret, seeking some work, and forgetting her . . . error. If you had a good impulse, then everything is not dead within you! Damnation, try to come back whole, Jacques!"

"You were listening to us," said Jacques, mechanically.

"What! What! No! Someone was listening for me, in spite of me, but I think you have a lot of gall to ask me so many questions."

"You are Marie's lover?" Jacques went on, with an ironic smile of understanding.

The ex-officer clenched his fists.



"If you had a drop of blood in your veins!" he growled, his eyes shining.

"Well, Monsieur le Baron, since I do not meddle with your affairs, do not meddle with mine," Jacques went on. "No! I shall not marry Mademoiselle de Vénérande, but I shall love her where I please: here, or elsewhere, in a drawing room, in a garret, and as I please. I only take orders from her; if I am vile, that's my own business; if she loves me as I am, that's her own business, too!"

"A thousand damnations! But that hysterical woman is capable of marrying you whether you want it or not, I know her."

"Just as Marie Silvert has become your mistress whether you wanted her or not, Monsieur le Baron, one never knows what one might do under different circumstances."

Jacques's calm and sweet tone changed Raittolbe. Was this man of pleasure perhaps telling the truth? Was beauty no longer necessary for physical enjoyment? He, the elegant rake, had sunk into the mud through devotion, and then, suddenly, the expert cynicism of the guttersnipe had seized his most secret self, and the substratum of corruption that the moralist always carries in his innermost being had risen to the surface. Of his own free will he had come back to Marie Silvert, trying to inspire an unholy passion, and this intelligent couple, Raittolbe and Raoule, had become, almost at the same time, the prey of a double beastliness.

"If the sky would only burst," shrieked the baron, shaking his fist at the storm.

Jacques went up to him.

"Does my sister not want me to marry Raoule?" he asked, still smiling delightfully.

"Damn it! Quite the contrary. She wants to encourage you to this damnable union. Jacques, you must resist them."

"Of course, Monsieur, I don't wish it in the slightest."

"Swear to me that . . ."

The end of the sentence was lost in the throat of the ex-officer of hussars. He could not very well extract an oath from that monster. He seized Jacques's arm. The latter shrank back and, as his floating sleeve left his arm bare, Raittolbe felt the mother-of-pearl skin beneath his fingers.

"You must promise me . . ."

But Silvert retreated still further:

"I forbid you, Monsieur, to touch me," he said coldly, "Raoule would not want you to."



Indignantly, Raittolbe upset a chair, jumped on the damnable creature whose velvet gown appeared to him now like the darkness of an abyss, and, pulling off the handrail of an easel, struck till the stick was broken into pieces.

"Now you know what a real man is like, scoundrel!" Raittolbe howled, seized by a blind anger whose violence he could not understand, and he added, as Jacques, bruised, fell to the ground:

"And she'll learn, the depraved one, that there is only one way, according to me, of touching rascals of your type!"

After the baron's departure, Jacques, as he opened his sad eyes in the night, saw on one of the studio walls what looked like a big firefly on the draperies.

## CHAPTER IX

So that she might see and hear what was happening in her brother's room, Marie Silvert had made a hole in the wall of her own room, which was next to his. The firefly that Jacques saw shining in the dark was the lamplight shining through this hole.

Raittolbe found her in bed, drinking a cup of rum, which she had heated on a little spirit lamp placed beside her.

Her room did not resemble in the least the apartment furnished by Raoule de Vénérande. A very heavy mahogany wardrobe with a mirror; a curtainless bed of the same mahogany, but less darkly stained; four chintz-covered chairs, placed haphazardly around an unpainted wooden table which was marked here and there where a frying pan had been placed on it; at the left, on the stove, where the dishes were piled up pell-mell, a streamer of a feathered hat dangled into a soup tureen full of melted butter.

Marie, her cheeks very red, smacked her lips as she sipped her rum; and looked tenderly at a coat decorated with the Legion of Honor that had been thrown over the nearest of the four chairs.

"What a fool I am," Raittolbe mumbled, his arms crossed, standing beside her bed, which he could not help comparing with Jacques's.

"You, my love, a fool!" said Marie, scandalized.

"By Heaven!" the ex-officer went on, "I have just acted like a brute, and not like a dispenser of justice."

"What did you do?" asked the woman, putting down her cup.

"What did I do, damn it, what did I do! I thrashed *Mademoiselle* your brother, something I had wanted to do badly the last few weeks without realizing it."



"You beat him up?"

"I thrashed him thoroughly!"

"Why?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I think he insulted me, but I'm not sure."

Marie, hidden in her sheets, looked like a happy cat.

"You were excited..." she sighed, "love often makes one cruel. I should have known that you would give it to him!"

"Let's not talk about it anymore! If Raoule complains, just send her to me. Good evening! Really, I was wrong to get mixed up in your affairs. They are much too complicated for a simple and honest man."

"Are you angry with me too?" she asked anxiously, raising herself up.

"Pah!"

And Raittolbe put on his coat and left without saying another word.

The keen, fresh air of the boulevard put him in a good humor, but an almost painful idea remained fixed in his brain, like the point of a knife in the middle of the forehead; he had struck Silvert, who could not defend himself, Silvert, naked beneath his velvet robe, Silvert, whose limbs were already weak from an enervating fatigue.

Why should he, the strong-minded, moralize over a poor absurd human being? Nice work, indeed! If he had done it at once, but no, first he had become the lover of the most disgusting of prostitutes...

He walked to the Rue d'Antin, where he occupied an apartment on the mezzanine floor, entered his smoking room, locked himself in, and sat down to write to Mlle de Vénérande.

As he began the letter, his pen slipped from his fingers. He could not loyally leave her in ignorance of the cause of his brutality; on the other hand, he thought, what right have I to interfere with the mutual shame of two lovers? If Raoule wants to marry Silvert, the scandal concerns her alone; it's not my duty to watch her honor.

Already he had torn up three sheets, hardly begun, when he recalled the hole pierced by Marie through the wall separating her from the lovers, one of whom he had just thrashed, and he felt so guilty that he gave up all thought of accusing anybody.

He contented himself by revealing to Raoule the exact location of that opening into her private life; he acknowledged that, in order to *mollify* Mlle Silvert's dangerous temper, he had thought it necessary to yield to her *fantasy*, that her admiration for his person was reaching disquieting proportions, that he intended to send her a bank note as farewell, and that he would never again set foot in the studio on the Boulevard Montparnasse.



He ended by regretting the anger of which Jacques had been the victim.

Raoule was to remain only a short time at the Duchesse d'Armonville's. Now she never left Paris except for very short visits, sacrificing for her love the summer holidays customary in the fashionable world; however, the baron did not forget to put on the letter: "Please forward." Then, his conscience at rest, he returned to his ordinary life.

Jacques knew Raoule's address, but he never thought of complaining, simply taking a bath and avoiding any explanations to his sister. Jacques, whose body was a poem, knew that his poem would always be read more attentively than any letter from such a vulgar writer as he. This extraordinary creature, through contact with a beloved woman, had acquired all the feminine wiles.

In spite of his silence, Marie was astonished to see a cut on his cheek.

"You seem to swagger," she said to him tauntingly. "Did Monsieur de Raittolbe insult you?"

She underlined her words with cruel irony, for she thought that her brother carried his complaisance a little too far.

"No! He only tried to forbid me to marry," Jacques replied bitterly.

"Well!" she grumbled, "that's not what he promised to tell you. So he wants to forbid you to marry... Well, just let him go to hell! Your Raoule is much too involved not to legalize your amusements one of these days. I even advise you to hurry matters along, for I have an idea."

"What is it?"

Marie planted herself in front of her brother and on tiptoe sneered:

"If you marry Mademoiselle de Vénérande, a girl of high society and worth millions, I, your sister, might reform and become Madame la Baronne de Raittolbe."

Jacques was deep in the contemplation of a small tortoiseshell box full of green paste.

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it; and then we would both forget the bad days, for we would all belong to good society."

Jacques's eyes suddenly shone, and he flushed delicately.

"I could punish her ex-lover if I wanted to be honest."

"Of course! But Raittolbe was never her lover, idiot! I happen to know he finds real women much more to his taste."

"Well, then, why did he strike so hard?" the young man objected, as the tears came to his eyes.

Marie merely shrugged her shoulders, pretending to think that Jacques was born to be beaten.



The next day, Raoule telegraphed that she would come the following night.

And indeed, about eight the next morning, the Vénérande mansion was all agog at Mlle's unexpected return. Aunt Elizabeth thought that some catastrophe must have occurred, and ran to meet her.

"What, darling," she cried, "you have come back already! It is so stifling in town, and so nice and fresh in the country!"

"Yes, my dear aunt, I am back. Our friend the duchesse's nerves are in a frightful state because the Baron de Raittolbe won't visit her. The poor baron has mysterious passions that keep him away from us."

"Now, Raoule, don't be catty," the canoness sighed, rather upset.

Raoule went to bed early, on the pretext that she was extremely tired. At midnight, she was in a cab on her way to the Left Bank.

Jacques was expecting her, fully believing that she would avenge him, for the telegram had said: "I know everything."

Without wondering how she had found out, Jacques was counting on a terrific outburst against the one he acknowledged as having been her happy lover.

Raoule burst impetuously into the studio, which was brilliantly lighted as a sign of rejoicing.

"Jaja? Where is Jaja?" she cried, feverishly impatient.

Jaja came forth, with expectant lips.

She seized his hands and stopped him.

"Speak quickly . . . What happened? Monsieur de Raittolbe writes me that he is sorry he discussed a very indecent subject with you . . . those are his very words. You must give me the details!"

She devoured him with her burning eyes.

"What's that on your cheek . . . that big blue bruise?"

"I have many others, come to our room and you'll see."

He pulled her away, carefully closing the portieres after him. Marie was sneering ironically, but she was uneasy, and she went to her room to put her ear to the hole in the wall.

Jacques took his clothes off one by one, and then Raoule uttered the cry of a she-wolf who finds her young massacred.

Her idol's fine skin was streaked from top to bottom with long, bluish scars.

"Ah!" the young woman cried, grinding her teeth, "they have spoiled you for me!"

"A little, it is true," said Jacques, sitting on the edge of his bed to look leisurely at the new tints that his bruises were taking. "Your friend Raittolbe has a heavy fist."



"Raittolbe put you in that state?"

"He does not want me to marry you... he loves you!"

The accent with which Jacques uttered those words is indescribable.

Raoule, on her knees, was counting the brutal marks of the stick.

"I'll tear his heart out. He came in here... answer me! Don't hide anything from me!"

"I was asleep. He came from my sister's room. We had words about marriage... Then he seized my arm... I stepped back because you forbade me to let myself be touched, do you remember? I even told him why it displeased me to feel his hand on my arm..."

"That's enough," roared Raoule, absolutely beside herself with rage, "that man saw you! That's enough for me! I can guess the rest, he wanted you and you resisted him."

Jacques burst out laughing:

"Are you mad, Raoule? If I obeyed you, in forbidding him to touch me, that's no reason to think that he... Oh, Raoule! What you dare suppose is disgusting! He struck me because he was jealous, that's all."

"Oh yes, of course! My own senses tell me far too plainly what a man, even an honest man, can feel, when he is placed face to face with Jacques Silvert..."

"But, Raoule..."

"But... I repeat that what I hear is enough for me..."

She obliged him to go to bed at once, went for a bottle of arnica, and bandaged him as if he had been a child in the cradle.

"You did not look after yourself well, my dear love; you ought to have called a doctor!" she said when she had finished.

"I did not want anyone to look at me. For a cure, I took some hashish!"

Raoule remained for a moment in a state of mute adoration, and then she jumped quickly on him, forgetting the blue bruises, seized by a delirious vertigo, and by a supreme desire to possess him by caresses, as his tormentor had possessed him by blows. She hugged him so that he cried with pain.

"You are hurting me!"

"All the better," she moaned. "I must rub out every scar with my lips, or I shall always see you naked before him."

"You are unreasonable," he moaned gently, "and you are going to make me cry!"

"Cry! What does it matter! He has seen you smile!"

"Your words are more cruel than his cruelest insult. He'll tell you himself that I was asleep. I could not have smiled at him... and then I put on my dressing gown!"



Jacques's simple explanations only added fuel to the fire.

"Who knows, Heavens, who knows," thought Raoule, "if this creature, whom I thought in my power, has not deceived me, and has been depraved for a long time."

Once the doubt had entered her mind, Raoule could restrain herself no longer. Violently she tore off the linen bandages she had placed around the sacred body of her idol, she bit his bruised flesh, grasping him tightly, and scratched him with her pointed nails. It was a complete defloration of those marvelous beauties that had made her swoon with mystical happiness.

Jacques was writhing in agony, bleeding from the real cuts that Raoule was reopening with a sadistic pleasure. All human cruelty, which she had tried to suppress in her metamorphosed being, reawoke, and now the thirst for that blood that flowed from the convulsed limbs replaced all the pleasure of her ferocious love. Her ear still at the hole of her room, Marie Silvert was trying to hear what was happening; suddenly she heard a heartrending cry:

"Help! She's hurting me, Marie! Help!"

She was frozen to the marrow of her bones, and since she was a *real woman*, as Raittolbe had said, she did not hesitate to run toward the scene of the butchery.

## CHAPTER X

Every year, at the time of the Grand Prix, a reception was given at the Vénérande mansion, and in addition to the intimate circle, a few new acquaintances were always invited.

This reception was less formal than the evenings when guests chatted quietly over cups of tea, and commoners and artists were present.

Since Raoule had come back from the Duchesse d'Armonville's, she was the prey to a permanent sadness, as if, during the storms that had swept Paris recently, her brain had received a terrible shock; and yet, as the ball drew nearer, she revived slowly from her depression. Her aunt had seen that she was troubled but had not tried to find an explanation; first because Raoule's moods were not part of her daily devotions, and also because she hoped that the reception, always gay, would distract *her nephew's* restless mind.

Indeed, Mlle de Vénérande deigned to watch and direct the preparations. She decided that the large central drawing room should be opened as well as the room next to the conservatory where the bright magnesium light would show the exotic flowers in all their brilliance.



Raoule could not conceive of giving a ball for the mere pleasure of inviting many people; she had to have the attraction of something original to offer her guests.

In the picture gallery, opposite the conservatory, a buffet, mounted on columns of crystal, would offer to the sportsmen made thirsty by the dust of Longchamp, an inexhaustible fountain of Roederer. When she submitted the invitations to her aunt, Raoule said in a matter-of-fact tone:

"I'll introduce my pupil to you, the painter of the bouquet of forget-me-nots. That young flower maker is such a courageous boy that he must be rewarded. Besides, we are receiving an architect whom Raittolbe is going to bring; it is an accepted thing now, artists are received in the best of society, and if we did not have them we would be swamped with the bourgeoisie, who are worse!"

"Oh! Raoule," Dame Elizabeth whispered in frightened tones, "he is only an unknown pupil."

"But, my dear aunt, that's just why we must invite him. The greatest geniuses would never arrive if they were not helped."

"True; and yet... he seems to come from the lowest classes, and he can't have any education."

"Do you think my cousin René was well brought up, dear aunt?"

"No, he is unbearable, with his backstage anecdotes and his theatrical manners, but... he is your cousin!"

"Well, the other, at least, does not belong to my family, and we won't have to share in his bad manners, even supposing, dear aunt, that this young man should not know how to behave in our society."

"Raoule, I am uneasy," the canoness repeated, "the son of a workman."

"Who draws as if he were Raphael's son!"

"And will he be properly dressed?"

"I'll answer for that," Mlle de Vénérande asserted with a bitter smile; and then, amending her sentence so that it would not sound so enigmatic:

"Is he not making a good living?"

"Well, I leave it to you, my dear Raoule," Aunt Elizabeth concluded, with a heavy heart.

That same day, the Baron de Raittolbe, who had not set foot in the house since Raoule's return, came to call. Very grave, very reserved, he gave Mme Elizabeth the cards for the enclosure at the races, without looking at her niece. Raoule left the new novel she was reading and held out her beautiful hand:



"Baron," she said, "our dear canoness has granted a formal invitation for your architect, Monsieur Martin Durand."

"My architect? Oh, yes, of course, a young man with a future, whom I met in some artistic circles... he competed successfully at the last Exposition Universelle. But Mademoiselle, I never asked..."

"I know you did not insist," Raoule interrupted drily, "but I did it... your friend," she stressed the word, "will be among our guests, along with Monsieur Jacques Silvert, the painter whom we went to see in the Boulevard Montparnasse."

If the goddesses who ornamented the ceiling had crashed to the floor, Raittolbe could not have shown more surprise. He looked straight at Raoule, and Raoule was obliged to look back at him — two sparks flew. Though he did not understand why the young woman had not answered his letter, or why Jacques was going to be "formally" one of them, the baron foresaw a catastrophe.

"I thank you on behalf of these gentlemen," he said, pulling at his mustache; "Jacques Silvert is a delightful friend, and Martin Durand an accomplished man of the world; to open your drawing room to them, Mesdames, is to anticipate their future fame!"

"Well," sighed Mme Elizabeth, "you reassure me, but they have awful names, and it will be hard for me to grow accustomed to them."

They talked for some time about the races, and Raoule discussed the chances of the different stables with Raittolbe. Then, as the latter was about to leave:

"By the way, Baron," Raoule cried happily, "do you know the new Devisme revolver?"

"No."

"A masterpiece!"

"Have you got one?" answered the baron, without flinching.

"Let us go to the fencing room," she answered rising, "I want you to try it."

An old lady dressed in purple, wearing a mother-of-pearl crucifix, was just entering. Mme Elizabeth, delighted at not having to talk anymore about the two commoners whose names irritated her, went up to meet her.

"Madame de Chailly, I am so happy, my dear president. We have so many things to talk about; just think, Father Stephane of Léoni is on his way; he is going to preach the autumn retreat!"

She spoke with the busy volubility of the unoccupied devotee.

"All the better!" Raoule concluded, ironically, letting the portiere fall, and she disappeared, followed by the baron.



More excited than he wished to appear, he kept silent while they followed the dark passages of the mansion.

The fencing room was a kind of vaulted terrace that Mlle de Vénérande, a perfect hostess, had fitted for that purpose.

When they reached it the baron pretended to be examining the sets of arms, and then:

"Where is the famous revolver?" he ventured, breaking a portentous silence.

Raoule answered by pointing to a chair; and then, very pale, her voice not betraying any anger:

"We have to talk..."

"We have to talk... about the artists?"

"Yes, Martin Durand must be Jacques Silvert's sponsor. They must meet this week. Please arrange it, for I have no time."

"Well! That's a very delicate mission, Raoule; if I do it, won't I have to submit to your aunt's reproaches?"

"There was a time when my aunt didn't matter to you, Raittolbe."

"Yes, but damn it, at the time you speak of, Raoule, I was hoping to become the niece's husband!"

"Today you are her most intimate friend. Everyone expects you to treat my aunt with the freedom of a close companion. Besides that, you are my cousin René's mentor. Those young men are of the same age, introduce them... Do your best."

"All right," Raittolbe answered, bowing.

For a moment the two comrades looked at each other like two enemies before a duel.

It was obvious to Raittolbe that Raoule was hiding something; it was obvious to Raoule that Raittolbe felt guilty.

"Have you seen Jacques again?" asked the baron at last, assuming complete indifference.

Mlle de Vénérande was toying with a loaded revolver, and it was with no less complete indifference that she aimed at the ex-officer's heart and fired. A cloud of smoke separated them.

"All right," he said without blinking; "if you had been a better shot I would be a dead man."

"Yes, as I was firing point-blank. It may be a foretaste of reality; don't you think you are destined, my dear man, to die by firing?"

"As an officer who has left the army, it is not very probable!"

In spite of Raittolbe's self-possession, he repressed with difficulty a nervous trembling. Those words "by firing!" upset him.

"I have seen Jacques again," Mlle de Vénérande went on, "he is not



... well. Marie is looking after him, and I think that when he is better he will get married."

"What!" said the baron, "without your permission?"

"Mademoiselle Silvert will marry Monsieur Raoule de Vénérande! Does it astonish you? Why the horrified air?"

"Raoule! Raoule! It is impossible! It is monstrous! It is... it is revolting even! You marry that low scoundrel! No, it is impossible!"

Raoule looked straight at the terrified baron:

"But I shall, if only to defend him from you, Monsieur!" she cried, incapable of containing her lioness-like rage.

"From me!"

Then, beside himself with rage, Raittolbe went up to her:

"Mademoiselle, when you insult me you forget that I can't treat you as I treated Silvert! Blood would be necessary to wipe out your words. What amends are you going to make?"

She smiled disdainfully:

"None, Monsieur, none! Only I want you to note that you accuse yourself before I thought of doing so."

"A million damns!" burst out the baron, so furious that he forgot he was face to face with a woman. "You'll take that back."

"I said, Monsieur," Raoule went on, "that I would defend him from you. I hope you won't deny having struck him?"

"No, I do not deny it... did he tell you why?"

"You touched him..."

"Is the young scoundrel by any chance made of glass? Can't an honest man's hand rest on his arm to emphasize affectionately some word of advice, without producing such an effect that he is ready to faint! Or am I mad, and is he the sane one?"

"I am marrying him," repeated Mlle de Vénérande.

"All right! Why should I object, after all? Marry him, Raoule, marry him."

And Raittolbe, broken by the shame of having been mixed up in such intrigues, fell into a seat.

"What a pity you haven't a father or a brother," he stammered, bending the blade of a fencing sword between his fingers.

The steel broke and one of the pieces struck Raoule's wrist. Under the lace, a drop of blood showed.

"Honor is satisfied," she declared with a hollow laugh.

"On the contrary, I am beginning to think that honor has nothing to do with our actions. I am giving up the struggle, Mademoiselle," he added, "and I leave to whoever chooses the dangerous mission of



introducing here the Antinoüs of the Boulevard Montparnasse."

Raoule shook her head:

"You fear him?"

"Be quiet . . . instead of thinking of lowering others, take pity on him and on yourself!"

"Well, Monsieur de Raittolbe, I demand that you obey me!"

"Your reason?"

"I want to see you face to face in my drawing room; you have to do it, otherwise I shall always suspect you."

"You are worse than crazy! . . . I won't obey . . ."

Raoule clasped her hands, whose transparent skin was stained by some drops of blood.

"Raittolbe, the human being whom you struck like the vilest of animals, when you knew him to be a coward and a weakling, I tore to pieces with my nails; I tortured him so, wherever your blows made a bruise, that he cried out . . . she came, and I, Raoule, was obliged to yield to his sister's indignation. Jacques is only a wound, and it is our work of art; won't you help me to make amends for that crime!"

The baron was deeply moved. He felt that Raoule was capable of anything and did not doubt for a minute that she had been able to reach such an excited state.

"It is horrible! Horrible," he muttered, "we are unworthy of humanity. Whether it is cowardice or love that paralyzed Jacques, we had no right, we who are supposed to think before giving way to our tempers. We ought to see in him only an irresponsible human being."

Raoule could not repress a movement of anger.

"You'll come," she said, "I wish it! But remember that I hate you and that in future I forbid you to look on him as a friend."

The baron paid no attention to this remark, which demanded another drop of blood.

"Does your aunt know of your prospective marriage?" he asked in a calmer tone.

"No," replied Raoule, "I count on your help in reconciling her to it; anyway, it will take place. Marie Silvert demands it."

And with great bitterness:

"I acknowledge the depth of my fall, but don't take advantage of my confession, Monsieur de Raittolbe."

"Can't I do anything about the sister, Raoule? Do you want me to complain to the police?" Raittolbe added, a gentleman till the end.

"No, nothing, nothing . . . scandal is unavoidable. She is the little stone that breaks the powerful steel engine. I humiliated her, and she



is avenging herself. Alas! I thought that for a prostitute money was everything, but now I see that she has, just as the descendant of the Vénérandes has, the right to love."

"To love! Good God! You make me shudder, Raoule."

"I don't need to tell you whom she loves, do I?"

In the depths of their humiliation they were silent.

They saw themselves prostrate on the ground, beneath the heel of an invisible enemy.

"Raoule," Raittolbe whispered gently, "if you really wanted to, we could escape from the abyss, you by never seeing Jacques again, and I by never speaking to Marie again. An hour of folly is not one's whole life; united by our follies, we could also be united by our rehabilitation; Raoule, believe me, come back to your senses... you are beautiful, you are a woman, you are wrong. Raoule, if you wish to be happy according to the laws of nature, you have only to forget ever having known this Jacques Silvert; let us forget him."

Raittolbe, not thinking of Marie any longer, had said: "Let us forget him." Raoule was somber, and in despair.

"I always love irresistibly," she said slowly. "Let my passion lead me to heaven or hell! As for you, Raittolbe, you have seen my idol far too near for me to be able to forgive you: I hate you!"

"Good-bye, Raoule," said the baron, holding out his hand to her. "Good-bye, I pity you."

She stood motionless, so he clasped her wrist and shook it with sincere affection; but as he left the fencing room and was putting on his gloves, he saw on his fingers a slight trace of blood. He recalled at once the incident of the broken sword; but nevertheless a superstitious terror seized him; the ex-officer of hussars could not repress a shiver of fear.

## CHAPTER XI

Martin Durand was the perfect type of the easy-going young man, whose only desire is to get on in the world and in all possible kinds of society. After an hour's talk with Jacques Silvert, he took him under his protection and became very friendly with him. According to him, only the compass could carry one far, and flowers, however marvelously done, have only the value of useless baubles, for which the artist may be paid a very high price once, and then ruined by their accumulation. All year long palaces are being built, but flowers are only occasionally in demand.

"As for example, the heaps of roses, the carts of violets, the bunches



of tulips that ornament your walls. My dear fellow, too many flowers! I feel asphyxiated when I even look at them!"

Then he lit a cigar, to offset the imaginary smell of the painted bouquets.

Jacques, who was as silent as all who carry in their hearts a shameful weight, answered Martin Durand's tirades in monosyllables, and when the latter, amazed by the luxury of the studio, asked if his uncle was a millionaire, he trembled before this new friend, as he would have trembled before a new tormentor.

"At last," bawled Martin Durand, a true child of the people, full of exuberant spirits and proud of having made his position by pushing himself forward, "we are going to make our start in the same leap, my dear fellow! Raittolbe swears it. A noble drawing room, millionaires, and pretty women. My head is swelling! By Jove! Madame de Vénérande has the most beautiful mansion in the whole of Paris. Of the Renaissance style, with arched windows and Louis xv iron balconies. I do not know whether she pays a lot for your studies of forget-me-nots; but the devil take me if she does not give me an order to pull down a pavilion and to build a new tower... We'll help each other... You'll tell her that I am the fashionable architect. And I'll let her know that the president of the Republic has ordered a bunch of peonies from you."

Jacques smiled painfully. This generous-hearted young man was happy. He earned his living by fighting with stones, he was strong and honest, and after all his sallies, he would sigh about his beautiful cousin, the daughter of the director of one of the biggest shops in the capital. Nobility, love, money, everything was going to be his, on a sign from him, because he was a man.

When their acquaintance had ripened, Martin Durand declared that he would call for Jacques on the day of the ball, and since he knew his friend Raittolbe at least as well as his friend Silvert, he said to him in delighted tones:

"That young man is the most superb type of professional model I have ever met; of course he has not got the slightest trace of talent. But I'll make something of him."

Artists are generally afflicted with the monomania of wishing that good society should admire, not their merit, but their bad manners; they especially want to teach what they know nothing about.

Martin Durand caressed his brown beard and added: "Yes, I shall make something of him; he is twenty-three, he can be improved, I think I'll astonish him greatly, even if the patents of nobility of all these people were in Egyptian granite."



Could one still astonish Jacques Silvert? Raittolbe did not answer.

The evening of the Grand Prix, at about ten, the center drawing room and the conservatory with the exotic plants were suffused by blinding jets of white magnesium light, more fluid, lighter and yet less blinding than electricity. Under its glare all the lines of the statues, all the folds of draperies, stood out, as though the day itself wished to have a hand in the reception of the Vénérandes.

The ancestors in doublets, the ancestresses in Medici collars, from their frames, with a sword or a fan, seemed to point out to each other the examples of low Parisian society walking past them.

Decidedly the sporting events had mixed up everybody, those who descended from Adam and those who descended from the crusaders. The architect, Martin Durand, and the Duchesse d'Armonville, Mme Elizabeth the canoness, and Jacques Silvert, a man of pleasure. With a marvelous understanding of people who want to amuse themselves, each according to his own ideas, at the expense of others, they all exchanged the most gracious welcoming smiles. Standing close to her aunt's monumental armchair, Mlle de Vénérande was receiving with a rather haughty mien, more akin to a gentleman of other times than to a coquettish woman.

When the strange creature left the realm of passion and ceased being ahead of her times, she returned to that epoch when the ladies in the castle refused to let down the portcullis for badly dressed troubadours.

Raoule wore a very filmy white gauze dress, with a courtly train, without a jewel, without a flower. A bizarre idea had made her place on her exposed shoulders a coat of gold mail, so finely meshed that her bust appeared to be molded in liquid gold. To mark off the line of the flesh from the cloth, a cord of diamonds encircled her neck, and in her black hair, piled up in Greek fashion, she had placed a diamond crescent, with phosphorescent points like moonbeams. The canoness was prudishly swathed in laces that covered a fancy-colored dress. Her small, gentle face, parchment-like, with eyes like a pale blue sky, was shaded by the coat of arms emblazoned on her armchair, which seemed to be ready to break under the powerful pressure of Raoule's arm.

On their right stood cousin René, a rare sample of the chic sportsmen of the day, explaining to whoever wanted to listen to him, how Simpson won by a length and why the gold silk tights were worn beautifully that year. Grave and severe, Raittolbe, his face inscrutable, thought of the old Gorgon when he looked at Mlle de Vénérande. The Marquis de Sauvarès jumped about like a night bird blinded by the crude light, while he watched with his dead eyes, lighted up sometimes by lubricity, the rounded shoulders of his goddaughter Raoule.



Around them a swarm of exquisitely gowned women were talking, with a consistency that annoyed the men, of the exploits of John Marc, the winning jockey.

In the crowd the amateur artists could be recognized by their constant moving about, forming a tide near the tulle or lace trains, the aim of their movements being to approach such and such a well-known person.

As for the real artists, they negotiated the same path, but in another way, so that the drawing room was transformed into another racetrack, a very discreet one. During one of these fluctuations, Raoule, who saw everything, made a sign to Raittolbe. He started, then looked in the direction indicated by the young woman's hardly raised finger. *He* was there, and Martin Durand was pushing him about violently.

"Go on! stupid!" he was grumbling, "you'll have to talk to her willy-nilly, while I study this bust. Damn nobility! . . . Only nobility can produce such caryatids. What a curve; my children! What a bust, what shoulders, what arms! I can see her holding up the balcony of the restored Louvre. She freezes one's blood just by bending slightly. Go on, I am following you . . ."

Jacques refused to go forward; bewildered by the magic light in this magnificent drawing room, walking on the trains of dresses, intoxicated by the heady scents emanating from the jewel-covered coiffures, the ex-flower maker felt himself still prey to the paradisiacal frenzy that the fumes of the hashish had given him.

"Aren't you silly, my poor little painter!" Martin Durand was saying, very annoyed at seeing this lack of audacity in a comrade. "By Jove, show a little more self-confidence! Look hard at the women, elbow the men out of your way, here, do as I do . . . Need two men like us fear the foot-lights? Ah, here is Monsieur de Raittolbe; we are rescued."

As a matter of fact, the architect was not any more sure of himself than Jacques was, but he had the inimitable self-assurance of all wreckers who know a little about rebuilding.

The Baron de Raittolbe shook hands with him, but avoided touching that of his friend.

"Messieurs, I am delighted to see you, I'll introduce you now . . ."

And he took them up to Raoule.

"Mademoiselle," he said, loudly enough to be heard by the principal group of guests, "let me introduce to you Monsieur Martin Durand, to whom the capital owes some beautiful monuments, and Monsieur Jacques Silvert."

The result of this brief introduction was that no one bothered about



the personage of the monuments, since it was known at once of what he was capable. The monocle was put up more willingly for the one whose name was not known. Jacques remained rooted, looking into Raoule's eyes, for he had not seen her since the sinister night.

He shivered like a man who has been suddenly awakened. His body quivered, and again he was the tamed slave of that hellish mind who appeared there, clothed in gold armor like a symbolic shield.

He remembered suddenly that in her presence he was complete, that he was her joy, as she was his suffering. His first intoxication disappeared, to be replaced by the servile love of the grateful animal. His wounds were cauterized when he remembered her caresses. An expression at once resigned and happy hovered on his beautiful mouth. Without thinking that people were looking at him, Jacques muttered:

"Heavens, why did you make me come here, I who am nothing and whom you no longer think worthy even of martyrdom?"

A flush rose to Raoule's temples, and she stammered: "But, Monsieur, I must believe that through her admiration for your work, my aunt concluded that you were..."

"I thank you, Madame," added Jacques, turning to the canoness, who was taken aback at seeing him so elegant in his ballroom clothes; "I thank you, but I am sorry you are more indulgent than Mademoiselle Raoule!"

"It is quite natural!" stuttered the saint, unaware of what she was saying, and accustomed in her world to answer without hearing what was said to her.

Only Raittolbe, the Marquis de Sauvarès, cousin René, and Martin Durand listened uneasily.

"More indulgent than Mademoiselle Raoule! Well!" said René with a satisfied laugh. "He is rather vulgar, Jacques Silvert. More indulgent... I do not understand!"

"Neither do I," grumbled the old marquis. "But something's in the wind! Ha! ha! An Adonis, on my word, an Adonis!"

Martin Durand was pulling at his pretty beard.

"I am outdone!" he thought. "The young man is quite gone on her and they all look as if they were playing to see who is the cleverest; what a contour, what caryatids, my children!"

Raittolbe, astonished by the sudden self-assurance of this low creature, admitted to himself that it almost reconciled her to him. The women approached Jacques, the Duchesse d'Armonville gazing on the marvelous features of this red-haired boy whom the starry whiteness of the lighting rendered as fair as a Titian Venus, swayed the others with a



boyish exclamation that suited her delightfully, for her hair was short and curly:

"By Jove, Mesdames, I am amazed!"

Just then the orchestra, hidden in a balcony above the room, began the prelude of a waltz, from behind the frieze; couples started to dance, and Raoule, seizing the opportunity, walked away from her aunt, followed by a small court. Jacques bent over her.

"You are very beautiful" he whispered ironically, "but I am sure that your dress will get in your way when you dance!"

"Hush, Jacques!" Mlle de Vénérande begged, dismayed. "Hush! I thought I had taught you to play your role as a man of the world differently!"

"I am not a man! I am not a man of the world!" replied Jacques, quivering with powerless rage. "I am the beaten animal who licks your hands! I am the slave who loves while he amuses! You taught me to speak, so that I might say *here* that I belong to you! No use marrying me, Raoule; one does not marry one's mistress; that's not done in your world."

"You frighten me! Now, Jacques! Must you avenge yourself in this manner? Let Marie die! Let our love no longer be accursed! Have I not seen your blood? And can we not live again the madness of our happiness? No! Do not speak to me anymore! Your breath, perfumed with young love, gives me fever!"

Raittolbe, nearest to them, whispered:

"Be careful, you are being watched!"

"Let us waltz!" said Raoule, carried suddenly away by the wildness of her sensual desire that grew greater still in the presence of the tempter.

Jacques, without using any of the ordinary formulae, clasped Raoule in his arms. She bent like a reed and the circle opened to let them pass.

"It is a kidnapping!" said the Marquis de Sauvarès. "This Jacques Silvert rushes up to our goddess as if she were an ordinary mortal!"

"The caryatid has feet!" sighed Martin Durand, distressed at having witnessed such a degrading metamorphosis.

René was trying to laugh:

"Amusing! Very amusing! Exceedingly funny. My cousin tames him, so that she can devour him all the easier later! One more . . . When the hundred are rich, we'll make a cross! Very amusing! . . ."

Raittolbe watched them waltzing with a dreamy air. Jacques waltzed well, and his supple body with its feminine movements seemed made for that graceful exercise. He did not try to hold his partner, but formed with her one waist, one bust, one being. As they turned around and



melted in an embrace, their bodies, despite their clothes, adhered to each other, they seemed united in that divine love where each is both, they seemed to be that *complete* individual spoken of in the fabulous tales of Brahmins, two distinct sexes combined in one unique monster.

"Yes, the flesh!" he thought, "Healthy flesh, the sovereign power of the world! She is right, that perverted creature! If Jacques had all nobility, all science, all talent, all courage, but if his complexion were not as lovely as a rose, we would not look at him with such wonder in our eyes!"

"Jacques!" Raoule was saying, yielding to her intoxication, "Jacques, I shall marry you, not because I fear your sister's threats, but because I want you openly, after having had you during our mysterious nights. You'll be my beloved wife, as you have been my beloved mistress!"

"And then you'll reproach me with having sold myself?"

"Never!"

"You know that I am not quite healed yet! . . . that I am *ugly*! How can I be of any use to you! . . . Jaja is spoiled! . . . Jaja looks awful!" he went on in tender tones, clasping her more tightly.

"I swear I'll make you forget everything! It would be so lovely to be your husband! To call you privately Madame de Vénérande! . . . because I shall give you my name!"

"That's true! I have no name!"

"Your sister is our Providence! She forced me to a promise I won't disown . . . my angel! My god! My beloved illusion!"

When they stopped, they thought they were in the studio in the Boulevard Montparnasse, and they smiled, exchanging a last promise.

"Do you know that the lion of the evening is Jacques Silvert?" said Sauvarès to a group of scandalized sportsmen.

"Where does that Antinoüs come from?" asked the rakes, anxious to hear some unwholesome story about the new favorite.

"From Mademoiselle de Vénérande's good pleasure," replied the marquis, and his pun had a great success.

But Jacques's sudden arrival disturbed them in their disdainful reflections and reduced them to silence. They were about to rise en masse to show their contempt for that obscure dauber in forget-me-nots when they all felt at the same time a bizarre commotion that riveted them to their seat. Jacques, with his head thrown back, still had his smile of a young girl in love; his open lips let his mother-of-pearl teeth show, his eyes enhanced by bluish circles, kept a shining moisture, and under his thick hair, his delicate ears, as red as roses, made all of them shiver. Jacques passed them without seeing them; his hips, well defined under



his evening clothes, touched them lightly . . . and in one movement they tightened their hands, suddenly grown moist.

When he had passed by, the marquis uttered this banal phrase:

"It is very warm, Messieurs; on my honor, it is unbearable! . . ."

They all repeated in chorus:

"It is unbearable! . . . On our honor, it is too warm!"

## CHAPTER XII

"Look here, my boy! Look here, by Heavens! A little vigor . . . You are a man, not a statue! If I were you I would be furious to feel the blade so near my skin. Imagine that I am your mortal enemy, a man deserving the most violent chastisement. I have taken from you a woman you adore, I have thrown ten cards into your face, I have called you a *coward* or a *thief*, you can choose. Damn! Do parry!"

And Raittolbe, the master, impatient with Jacques Silvert, the pupil, rushed on to terrible assaults.

"You are not patient enough, Baron!" murmured Raoule, who was present at the lesson, clothed in a fencing costume. "I give him permission to rest; enough for today!"

Raoule took a sword, fell on guard before Raittolbe, and, as if to avenge Silvert, she charged him with mad impetuosity.

"Damn," he cried, after she had touched him three times in succession. "You rush too quickly, my dear! I was talking to Jacques, not to you!"

Just then lunch was announced: cousin René and several intimates entered, and the champions were congratulated, while a servant went discreetly up to Jacques and whispered something in his ear. Raoule, still very excited, did not notice the young man change color and go quickly into the adjacent smoking room.

Jacques had at last obtained from the canoness Elizabeth the right of entry into the house; he had been officially engaged to Raoule for a month. After the ball at which all the lovers of scandal had been scandalized by the introduction of young Silvert, Raoule, as mad as those people of the Middle Ages who were possessed of devils and were no longer responsible for their actions, had brutally declared herself at the bed of the unhappy canoness. It had been a very cold, very dark, very dull morning. The canoness, under her armor of blankets, was dreaming of mortification and frozen pavements; she was awakened by the sonorous voice of *her nephew*, ordering her maid to make a roaring fire.

"Why have a fire? Today is my day of mortification, my dear child,"



said the aunt, opening her eyelids, as transparent and as pale as consecrated wafers.

"Because, my dear aunt, I have come to talk over with you some very important and grave matters, which will be such a natural mortification that they will be ample!"

With a nasty laugh, the young woman sat down in an armchair, covering her feet with her ermine-lined dressing gown.

"At this time of day? Heavens, you awoke very bright and early, my darling. I am listening."

And the canoness propped herself up on her pillows, her eyes big with fright.

"Aunt Elizabeth, I want to get married!"

"Get married! Oh, Saint Philippe de Gonzague must have inspired you, for I pray to him about that every vigil. Get married, Raoule! But then I will be able to fulfill my dearest wish, to leave this world of vanities and retire to the Visitandines, where my veil is waiting for me. Blessed be the Lord! Of course," she added, with a malicious smile, "the Baron de Raittolbe is the bridegroom-elect?"

"No, it is not Raittolbe, my aunt! I warn you I don't want to ennoble myself anymore. The awful names please me much more than all the titles on our useless family parchments. I want to marry the painter Jacques Silvert!"

The canoness jumped up in her bed, raised her virginal arms above her chaste head, and cried:

"The painter Jacques Silvert? Have I heard properly? That beautiful youth, homeless and moneyless, to whom you give charity?"

For a moment astonishment had paralyzed her tongue; then she went on, falling back on her pillows:

"You'll make me die of shame, Raoule!"

"My aunt," the indomitable daughter of the Vénérandes said, "perhaps it might be less shameful to marry him!"

"Do explain what you mean!" moaned Mme Elizabeth in despair.

"Out of respect for you, my aunt, do not ask it! You have loved in too saintly a way to..."

"I represent your mother, Raoule..." interrupted the canoness with great dignity. "I have the right to hear everything."

"Well, I am his mistress!" answered Raoule, with terrifying calm.

Her aunt became as pale as the immaculate sheets around her; in the depths of her uncertain eyes gleamed the only fit of anger of her pious existence, and she said in a hollow voice:

"May the will of God be done... Let there be a misalliance, my



niece. I have enough tears left to wipe out your crime . . . I shall enter the convent the day after your marriage."

And ever since that cold morning, during which a hellish fire had burned in the fireplace of the deeply mortified canoness, Raoule had done as she liked. Her fiancé had been presented to her family and her intimates; and then, without an objection being raised against her fantastic caprice, each had ceremoniously bowed to Jacques. The Marquis de Sauvarès had declared he was "not bad." René, the cousin, had thought him "amusing, exceedingly amusing!" The Duchesse d'Armonville had laughed enigmatically, and, on the whole, since a far-distant uncle had died at the right moment and left the magnificent dauber 300,000 francs, he became a little less ridiculous.

Raoule, of course, had acted the part of the uncle.

The servants in the mansion said, in their own quarters: he is a foundling. A foundling to blacken the bright escutcheon of the Vénérandes!

During the sad autumnal nights, the sound of sobs could be heard from the closed room of Mme Elizabeth; it sounded like the wind whistling through the principal entrance.

Raoule was still fencing, and Raittolbe was obliged to defend himself. Then they heard a sudden, short interjection, and they both stopped short, for they had recognized Marie Silvert's voice.

Mlle de Vénérande, under the pretext of being a little tired and without thinking of the baron or her admirers, walked toward the smoking room door. Raittolbe did likewise.

"Why don't the rest of you go on to lunch?" said Raoule. "We'll brush up and follow you in a few minutes."

The gentlemen went out, discussing the sparring blows.

"Why do you come here?" Jacques was saying behind the boudoir door. "To make a scene?"

"I'm not so stupid as that, for they'd put me out!"

"Well, then!" said Jacques impatiently. "Please keep quiet."

"Keep quiet? That's right . . . you can square yourself by joining the upper crust, but I, your sister, must remain a prostitute as before?"

"What are you driving at?"

"What am I driving at? I want you to tell your Raoule that her conditions are not mine. I don't care anymore for the scrap of paper she sent me than for my old shoes. So, my love birds, I am in the way, am I? You are ashamed of Marie Silvert; she shall be sent away to the country, and confined somewhere; well, I won't go! We have eaten the bread of poverty together, and now that you are going to feed on roast chicken, I want a good share of it, or else I'll put a spike in your wheels. Yes!



Monsieur shows off from morning till night, he is dressed like a kept woman, nothing is too good for him! And his sister is to be dressed in rags, to wear secondhand hats, and to feed on crusts. That's as it should be! You thought your six-hundred franc pension would shut me up, but I shall not let myself be fooled; Marie Silvert does not need your money, it would soil her!"

"Don't let that worry you," said Mlle de Vénérande, as she entered just then, followed by Raittolbe. "Don't worry, you'll get nothing!"

Raoule spoke coldly and distinctly, and for a moment her words appeared to have the effect of a cold shower on the woman.

"All right," she said, biting her lips, sorry not to be able to come back to the subject of the six hundred francs by persuasion. "All right"; and then, digging her fingers into the back of the chair: "In fact, I like that better, for you disgust me — not you, sir," she said, trying to smile at Raittolbe, who was hiding behind Raoule, whom he regretted having followed. "And yet you are the cause of everything."

"What!" said Raittolbe, coming forward, "what are you saying?"

"It is clear; you know that Mademoiselle and Monsieur have never forgiven me for having been your mistress. It annoyed them!"

"That's enough," the baron interrupted roughly. "Do not use our liaison as a pretext to go on with your insults. You practiced your trade, I paid you, and we are quits."

"That's true," answered Marie, suddenly calm. "I even have here the hundred francs you sent me; I have not used any. It hurt me to receive it. It may be idiotic, but it is true."

She spoke with great submission, looking at Raittolbe with beseeching eyes.

"You see, sir," she went on, without paying any more attention to her brother and Raoule, "being poor does not keep me from having a heart. You say that I did my work well, but you know that is not so! I loved you, I still love you, and you have only to say the word and I'll do my utmost for..."

"That's enough!" Raittolbe interrupted, enraged at being made ridiculous in Raoule's presence. "I'll be satisfied with your departure!"

Truly moved a few minutes before, the woman felt her anger rising again. Then it burst out:

"All right! I shall go, but I'll make a scandal! You can laugh, you can laugh, but I'm not through! This is the final blow! It amuses you, eh? It is funny," she jeered hideously. "You are pleased, aren't you? You were annoyed because I had caught his eye, and now he is sending me about my business. Damn it, are they the only ones who can have a good time?"



Not on your life! Since I can't find one man to have me, I'm going to have them all, my children; it will do you honor when your future sister-in-law announces to you her entry into a brothel."

"Your life won't change much," Mlle de Vénérande jeered, going toward the door and signaling to Jacques to follow her.

Jacques stood facing his sister, his fists clenched, his face pale, biting his lips; perhaps there was only one dishonor for which he had not been prepared in the suddenness of his fall.

"Bon voyage!" Raoule said ironically, on the threshold of the fencing room.

"Oh! we shall see each other again, sister-in-law," replied Marie, sneeringly. "On my days out I shall come to pay my respects. You can't afford to be disgusted, you know; Marie Silvert, even as a registered prostitute, is as good as Madame Silvert; at least she makes love normally!"

She hardly had time to finish her sentence, for Jacques, before Raittolbe could stop him, seized his sister by the wrist and shook her desperately.

"Will you shut up, you miserable wench?" he growled in a hollow voice. Then his muscles relaxed and Marie, pirouetting, fell almost to her knees.

Marie straightened herself up, went to the door, opened it, and then, turning to her brother, flanked by Raittolbe and Raoule like bodyguards, said:

"You must not get nervous like that, my dear. You need your muscles, you need muscles enough for two . . . You look as you did the day you were beaten. You know the beating the baron gave you. Take care, you are going to faint! Surely something is wrong with you: your chaste spouse won't get what she wants. Doesn't he look nice like that, between his two lovers!"

Marie spoke those last words with a ferocious laugh, the outburst of which must have shaken the Vénérandes' old mansion to its foundations.

Mme Elizabeth, the good angel who had tolerated it, and Marie Silvert, the base demon who had excited it, were flying at the same time, one to Paradise, the other to the abyss, from that monstrous love, which, in its pride reached higher than heaven, and in its depravity fell lower than hell.

### CHAPTER XIII

About midnight, the guests at Jacques Silvert's wedding noticed something very strange; the bride was still with them, but the bridegroom had disappeared. A sudden illness, a lovers' quarrel, and all the other



possible surmises were broached by the clan of the intimates, already greatly interested in that union. The Marquis de Sauvarès suggested that Jacques had found a challenge from an unhappy rival under his napkin, at the beginning of the marvelous meal that had been served to them. René thought that Aunt Elizabeth, who was to say good-bye to the world that same night, was placing her guardianship in the hands of Raoule's husband. Martin Durand, the bridegroom's witness, was grumbling openly, because artists have a right to be disagreeable at critical moments. He could no longer bear Jacques. Near one of the corners of the monumental fireplaces, where the burning logs of the new conjugal hearth let fall a shower of sparks, the Duchesse d'Armonville, thoughtful, her glasses between her tapering fingers, was watching Raoule, who stood opposite, tearing her orange-blossom bouquet mechanically. Raittolbe was assuring the duchesse in an undertone that love was the only power capable of really smoothing out the political difficulties of the government of the moment.

"But," the duchesse, not paying the slightest attention to the stupidities of the baron, murmured, "can you tell me why our dear bride had her hair done in such an . . . original fashion? It has been puzzling me ever since the religious ceremony."

"Probably marriage, for Madame Silvert, is only another way of taking the veil," said Raittolbe, hiding an ironic smile.

Mme Silvert was wearing a long dress of silver brocade and a swansdown jacket. She had removed her veil at the beginning of the ball, and the wreath of orange blossoms was resting like a tiara on her curls, as close to her head as a boy's; her fearless face harmonized admirably with those short curls, but she resembled in no way a chaste bride, ready to lower her eyes beneath her perfumed tresses, which the impatience of the bridegroom would soon uncoil.

"I assure you," the Duchesse said, "I assure you that Raoule has had her hair cut short."

"A recent fashion that I have definitely adopted, my dear Duchesse," answered Raoule, who had overheard.

Raittolbe applauded silently, striking the palm of his hand with the tip of his fingers. Mme d'Armonville bit her lips to keep from laughing. Poor Raoule! If she went on growing more masculine, she'd end by compromising her husband!

The bridesmaids came forward noisily to offer some of the cake that had been imported from Russia, in accordance with a custom that was all the rage in high society that year. Still the bridegroom did not appear, and Raoule had to keep her part of the cake whole. Midnight



struck; and, then, the young woman crossed the immense drawing room proudly and haughtily; as she reached the triumphal arch that had been made from all the plants in the conservatory, she turned around and gazed at the assemblage with the air of a queen dismissing her subjects. With a graceful but brief phrase, she thanked her guests, then she went out backward, saluting them with a quick elegance, and with a swordsman's salute. The doors closed.

In the left wing, at the other end of the mansion, was the nuptial chamber, and there the deepest darkness and the most discreet silence reigned.

The passages were lighted with lanterns of blue Bohemian glass, as the gas had been lowered, and in the library, close to the bedroom, a single candelabrum, held by a bronze slave, was used as a lamp. Just as Raoule entered its circle of light, she noticed a woman, dressed as simply as a servant, silhouetted against the heavy draperies.

"What do you want of me?" murmured the bride, standing very erect and letting the immense train of her silver dress trail around her feet.

"Say good-bye, my niece," replied Mme Elizabeth, whose pale face seemed ghostlike.

"So you are going away, my aunt!"

Very much moved, Raoule held out her arms.

"Won't you kiss your *nephew* a last time?" she said, in a respectful and sweet voice.

"No!" said the canoness, shaking her head. "In heaven, perhaps, but not here! I cannot condone with my forgiveness the defilements of a fallen woman. Good-bye, Mademoiselle de Vénérande. But before my departure I want you to know: however saintly God wishes me to be, he has permitted me to learn of your horrible dissolute actions. I know everything. Raoule de Vénérande, I curse you."

The canoness spoke in a very low tone, and yet Raoule seemed to hear that curse resound through the quiet of the nuptial chamber.

She shivered superstitiously.

"You know everything? Explain your words, my aunt! Has the sorrow of seeing me take a commoner's name made you lose your reason?"

"You are the sister-in-law of a prostitute. She was here a short while ago, although you had forgotten to invite her; she forced me to look into the abyss. You were not Jacques Silvert's mistress, Raoule de Vénérande, and I regret it with all my soul! But remember, Daughter of Satan, that abnormal desires are never satisfied! You'll meet despair just when you believe in happiness! God shall plunge you into doubt when you think you have reached security. Good-bye. I am going to pray under another roof."



Raoule, paralyzed by the powerlessness of her rage, let her go without uttering a word.

When Mme Elizabeth had disappeared, the bride called her maids, who were waiting to help her undress.

"Did someone come to see my aunt?" she asked in a husky voice.

"Yes, Madame," answered Jeanne, one of her maids, "a person covered in veils who talked to her for a long time."

"And that person?"

"Went away carrying a small box. I think that Madame the canoness made her a last charity before leaving for her convent."

"Ah! All right; a last charity."

Just then the noise of a carriage rattled the panes of the library.

"Your aunt has ordered the carriage," said Jeanne, bending her head, so as not to show her emotion.

Raoule went to the dressing room and pushed her away:

"I don't want anyone; go and find someone to tell the Marquis de Sauvarès, my godfather, that henceforth he'll be alone as host."

"Yes, Madame."

Jeanne went out at once, completely bewildered. The air in the Vénérande mansion seemed to have become unbearable.

One by one, the guests passed before the marquis, more astonished than they were at the duty that had been thrust on him; and then, when only Raittolbe was left, M. de Sauvarès took him by the arm.

"Let us go, my dear fellow," he said, with a mocking laugh. "This house has decidedly become a tomb."

The footman who had been in attendance in the hall, put the lights out, and soon silence and the profoundest darkness covered all the deserted reception rooms and the whole mansion.

After she had bolted the door of her dressing room, Raoule had undressed, still the prey of a proud anger.

"At last!" she said, when the chaste brocade dress fell to her impatient feet.

She took a small copper key, opened a closet hidden among the draperies, and took out a black evening suit, complete with patent leather pumps and pleated skirt. Before the mirror, which reflected the image of a man as beautiful as any novelist's heroes dreamed of by young girls, she passed her hand, on which shone the wedding ring, through her short curly hair. A bitter smile played on her lips, the upper one slightly darkened by a brownish down.

"Dear aunt," she said coldly, "happiness is the more real if it is given in the maddest way possible; if Jacques does not waken from the sen-



sual sleep that I have instilled in his obedient limbs, I shall be happy despite your curses."

She went to a velvet portiere, raised it with a feverish gesture, and stopped, her bosom heaving.

The scene was fairylike. From that pagan sanctuary erected amid modern splendor, emanated a subtle intoxication, incomprehensible, but an intoxication from which no one could have been immune. Raoule was right . . . love can be born in any of all the cradles prepared for it.

Mlle de Vénérande's former bedroom, circular, with a ceiling shaped like a cupola, was covered with blue velvet and paneled with white satin threaded with gold.

A carpet designed by Raoule covered the floor with all the beauties of Oriental flowers. Woven from thick wools, it had such bright colors and such striking relief that one seemed to be walking on enchanted ground.

In the center, under the light supported by four silver chains, the nuptial bed had the shape of the primitive vessel that bore Venus to Cytherea. A swarm of cupids, crouched at its feet, supported with all their strength the Tritons' shell, padded with blue. Poised on a column of Carrara marble stood Eros, with his bow on his back, holding with rounded arms heavy brocade curtains, which fell into voluptuous folds all about the bed. At the side, a tripod bore an incense burner studded with precious stones, which burned with a pink flame. The bust of the Antinoüs with the enameled eyes faced the tripod. The windows had been barred as in a harem, behind softly tinted stained glass.

The only furniture in the room was the bed. Raoule's portrait, signed by Bonnat, hung on the blue silk, surrounded with emblazoned draperies. In this canvas she wore a Louis xv costume, and a reddish greyhound was licking the handle of the whip she held in her hand.

Jacques was stretched on the bed; with the coquetry of a courtesan expecting her lover at any minute, he had pushed away the padded blankets and the soft eiderdown. A vivifying warmth made the room snug and cozy.

With gleaming eyes and passionate warmth, Raoule went up to the altar of her god, and in her ecstasy:

"You alone exist, Beauty," she sighed. "I believe in you only."

Jacques was not asleep: he rose softly without changing his languishing pose; against the azure background of the curtains, his supple and marvelously well shaped bust shone as pink as the flame of the incense burner.

"Then why did you wish to destroy that beauty that you love?" he asked in a passionate whisper.

Raoule sat on the edge of the bed and caressed his slender bust.



"I was punishing an involuntary betrayal on your part; think of what I would do if you ever really betrayed me."

"Listen, dear master of my body, I forbid you to arouse your suspicions again, it frightens me too much. Not on my account!" he added, laughing with his adorable childish laugh, "but on yours."

He laid his submissive head on Raoule's knees.

"It is very beautiful here," he said with a grateful look. "We shall be very happy."

With the tip of her index finger Raoule was tracing and caressing the harmonious curve of his eyebrows.

"Yes, we shall be happy here, and we must not leave this temple for a long time, so that our love shall permeate every object, every drapery, every ornament, with its mad caresses, like that incense which penetrates with its perfume all the draperies that surround us. We had decided on a journey, but we won't go; I don't want to run away from a pitiless society whose hatred for us I feel growing more and more. We must show them that we are the stronger, since we love each other."

She was thinking of her aunt . . . Jacques of his sister.

"Well," he said, resolutely, "we shall stay. Besides, I shall perfect my education and make myself a worthwhile husband. As soon as I know how to fight, I'll try to kill the wickedest of your enemies."

"Think of that! Madame de Vénérande, killing someone!"

He fell back gracefully and whispered in her ear:

"She must kill someone, since the means of bringing someone in the world have been absolutely denied her."

They could not help laughing; and in that gaiety, both cynical and philosophical, they forgot the pitiless people who had said, as they left the mansion of the Vénérandes, that they were leaving a tomb.

Little by little, their insolent lightheartedness grew calmer. It no longer distorted their mouths as they kissed. Raoule drew the curtain to her, plunging the bed into a delightful semiobscurity, in the depths of which Jacques's body gleamed, starlike.

"I have a caprice," he said, speaking in low tones.

"It is the moment for caprices," answered Raoule, one knee on the carpet.

"I want you to court me as a bridegroom does at such a time, when he is a man of your rank."

And he twisted around, coaxingly, in Raoule's arms. "So! So!" she said, holding off, "then I must be proper?"

"Yes . . . I am shy, I am a virgin . . ."

And with the quickness of a schoolgirl who has uttered a malicious



remark, Jacques gathered the sheets around him: their laces fell against his forehead and only the roundness of his shoulder could be seen, and, covered thus, it looked like the wide shoulder of a woman of the people admitted by chance into the bed of a wealthy rake.

"You are being cruel," said Raoule, pushing the curtain aside.

"No," said Jacques, not thinking that she had begun the game already. "No, no, I am not cruel, I am telling you, I want to play . . . I am full of gaiety. I feel quite drunk, all loving, full of mad desires. I want to make use of my royalty, I want to make you cry out with rage, I want you to bite my wounds as you did when you tore at me from jealousy. I want to be cruel in my way, too."

"Haven't I waited many nights and haven't I asked in my dreams for the pleasures that you denied me?" Raoule went on, standing up and looking at him somberly with an expression whose power had given humanity another monster.

"I don't care," answered Jacques, putting out the tip of his tongue on his red lips. "Really, I don't care much for your dreams, for reality will be so much better. I beg you to begin at once, or I'll be angry."

"But it is the most atrocious martyrdom that you can impose on me," Raoule's voice went on, with its deep masculine intonation, "to wait when supreme felicity is within my reach; to wait when you don't know how proud I am to have you in my power; to wait when I have sacrificed everything to have you night and day with me; to wait when the most wonderful happiness would be to hear you say: 'I am so happy with my head resting on your shoulder that I want to sleep that way!' No, no, I haven't the courage!"

"I shall have it," Jacques declared, sincerely disappointed that she did not lend herself to the comedy and benefit voluptuously thereby. "I repeat that it is a caprice."

Raoule fell to her knees, her hands folded, delighted at seeing him her dupe, and, because he was accustomed to the deceit that he begged for, not knowing that she had been using it in her passionate language for twenty minutes.

"Oh! you are wicked! I find you unbearable," said Jacques, unnerved. Raoule had stepped back.

"Because I can't see you without growing mad," she said, herself being a victim of her delusion; "because your divine beauty makes me forget who I am and gives me a lover's thrills; because I lose my head when I see your ideal nudity . . . what does it matter to our delirious passion what the sex of our caresses is? What do the proofs of the love our bodies can exchange matter? What does the remem-



brance of love through all the centuries and the reprobation of all mortals matter? . . . You are beautiful . . . I am a man, I adore you and you love me!"

Jacques understood that, at last, she was obeying him. He raised himself on one elbow, his eyes full of a mysterious joy.

"Come!" he said, deeply thrilled, "but do not take off your clothes, for your beautiful hands suffice to chain your slave . . . Come!"

Raoule fell on the silk bed, uncovering anew the white and supple limbs of this amorous Proteus, who now had nothing left of his virginal modesty.

For an hour this temple of modern paganism heard only long sighs and the rhythmic noise of kisses; then suddenly a heartrending cry was heard, like the howling of a demon who has just been mastered.

"Raoule," cried Jacques, his face distorted, his teeth biting his lips, his arms extended as if he had been crucified in a spasm of pleasure. "Raoule, aren't you a man? Can't you be a man?"

And the sob of lost illusions, forever dead, came from the innermost part of his being.

Raoule had undone her white silk waistcoat to feel the beating of Jacques's heart better, and she had exposed one of her naked breasts, a round breast, as rounded as a champagne cup, with its closed flower bud that was never to blossom into the sublime pleasure of giving milk. Jacques had been awakened by the brutal revolt of all his passion, and pushed Raoule away from him, with his clenched fist:

"No! No! Don't take your clothes off," he shouted, at the height of his madness.

They played this comedy sincerely only once, and they had sinned against their love, which if it were to live must face the truth while fighting it at the same time with all its strength.

#### CHAPTER XIV

They had remained in Paris to brazen it out, to defy, but public opinion, that great prude, refused to fight. The Vénérande mansion was ignored. Slowly Mme Silvert was shut out of the circle of the most sought after women; doors were not closed against her, but there were audacious ones who never entered hers. The winter functions did not claim her presence, and she was no longer consulted about the new play, the new novel, the new fashions. Jacques and Raoule went often to the theater, but no friends entered their box; they had no more friends, they were the damned of the Garden of Eden, having behind



them, instead of an angel with a flaming sword, an army of society. Raoule's pride held fast.

Her aunt's departure for a convent the very night of her wedding was the subject of many conversations, and, although no one had pitied the canoness when she did not lead the life of her dreams, she was enormously pitied now, when she at last fulfilled her dearest wish.

As for Marie Silvert, she did not reappear. In a class that had nothing to do with the society to which Raoule belonged, it was known that a very luxurious house of prostitution was soon to be opened, and some habitués of these houses knew that a Marie Silvert would direct it.

So true is the saying that the charities of saints do not always sanctify the recipients!

Nothing, however, had been heard of it in Raoule's circle; she did not know this shameful fact. She was respected, that's all, and people avoided her when she passed as they would a woman threatened by an impending catastrophe.

One evening, with a silent understanding, Jacques and Raoule put back the hour of pleasure. They had been married three months, and for three months every night had found them dizzy with their caresses under the blue cupola of their temple. But that evening, near a dying fire, they talked: there is an inexplicable attraction in the agony of dying coals. Jacques and Raoule felt the need to talk to each other, without feminine ecstasies, without voluptuous cries, like good friends who see each other after a long absence.

"What has become of Raittolbe?" said Raoule, letting the smoke of a Turkish cigarette waft to the ceiling.

"It is true," Jacques muttered, "he is not polite."

"You know I am not afraid of him any more," said Raoule, laughing.

"It would amuse me to play the part of *your husband* before his snarling mustachios."

"So! You fatuous young man! . . ."

She added gaily:

"Let us invite him to tea tomorrow . . . we won't go to the Opera, and we won't read any old books."

"If you see nothing against it."

"A honeymoon does not allow any surprises, Madame," said Raoule, carrying Jacques's white hand to her lips.

The latter blushed and shrugged his shoulders with an imperceptible movement of impatience.

The next evening the samovar was steaming before Raittolbe, who had offered no objection to Raoule's invitation. The first words ex-



changed were full of irony on both sides. Jacques was almost impertinent, Raoule more so, Raittolbe exceedingly so.

"Why are you sulky?" said Jacques, offering him his finger as if in condescension.

"Is the dear baron jealous of our happiness?" asked Raoule, looking for all the world like an offended gentleman.

"Heavens, my dear friend," said Raittolbe, as if ashamed and talking only to Mme Silvert, "I always fear the pranks of nervous women: if by any chance my pupil," and he pointed out Jacques, "should take the fancy to uncap his foil, you see..."

While they took tea, a few dangerous allusions were made again.

"You know that the Sauvarès, the Renés, the d'Armonvilles, and even Martin Durand avoid us," said Raoule, laughing bitterly, like a condemned devil.

"They are wrong... I take it on myself to replace them advantageously. One has intimate friends or none," replied Raittolbe.

From that moment on, he came every Tuesday to the Vénérande mansion. The fencing lessons began again; and once Jacques went with the baron to try out a recently acquired horse. The marriage seemed to have smoothed out all the difficulties that stood in the way of the ex-officer of the hussars.

He treated Jacques as an equal, and, when he saw that he rode well, a cigar in the corner of his mouth, he thought:

"Perhaps one could make a man out of that clay... if Raoule were willing."

And he thought of a possible rehabilitation, provoked, in a moment of forgetfulness, by a real mistress, whom Raoule would have to fight with ordinary feminine tactics.

Coming back from the Bois, Jacques wished to visit Raittolbe's apartment. They went as far as the Rue d'Antin.

Jacques sniffed as he entered.

"Oh!" he said. "It smells strongly of tobacco!"

"Well, my dear fellow," Raittolbe objected maliciously, "I am not a renegade. I have my beliefs and I keep them."

Suddenly Jacques cried out in surprise; he had just recognized all the furniture of his old apartment in the Boulevard Montparnasse.

"Oh," he said, "I gave them to my sister."

"Yes, she sold them to me; I had plenty of other furniture, but..."

"What?" asked the young man, very much intrigued.

"I wanted to have them because they are like chapters of a true story one does not wish to see published."



"You are very kind!" muttered Jacques, sitting down upon his old Oriental divan.

He could find only that ordinary phrase to thank the baron for his thoughtfulness. The latter sat beside him.

"That time is far distant now, isn't it, Jacques?"

And he struck him familiarly on his thigh.

"How do you know?" muttered Jacques, leaning backward.

"What? I hope that Madame Silvert will soon give us the opportunity of eating the customary sugared almonds offered at christenings. As for me, I want some with kirsch in them; they are the only ones I like."

"Now, you bad joker, will you shut up?"

"What?" grumbled Raittolbe.

"Yes, of course, don't you want me to give birth, too?"

The baron haphazardly seized a beautiful china ornament and sent it crashing against the wall.

"Hell and damnation!" he roared. "Are you stuffed by any chance? So I did not have visions on a certain night."

"Oh, well!" said Jacques, without reserve. "A bad habit is quickly learned!"

Raittolbe paced the floor.

"Jacques," he said, "do you want to try something without your female jailer knowing anything about it?"

"Perhaps..."

And Jacques smiled strangely.

"Go to your sister's at twilight, and see what happens!"

"You rake!" said Raoule's husband, shaking his pretty red head.

"You refuse?"

"No, I want some further information."

"Well!" declared Raittolbe, seized suddenly by an absurd shyness. "I am not beating the drum for those places; they are all charming and well versed in their arts, that's all."

"That's not enough!"

"By Jove! You're a headless duck, then?" muttered Raittolbe furiously.

Jacques looked with wondering eyes, as pure as those of a virgin, at the hardened rake who was speaking to him.

"What are you saying, Baron?"

"Well, that's funny, by Jove! Heavens!"

And Raittolbe held his head; then he looked at this tired face, so delicately and voluptuously blond.

"I can't very well tell you a story you'll go and repeat to our wild Raoule... a would-be boy."



"No, I won't tell anything . . . tell me everything . . . if it is amusing."

And, filled with an unhealthy curiosity, Jacques forgot to whom he was talking; and confusing Raoule with men, and men with Raoule, he rose and leaned on Raittolbe's shoulder. For an instant his perfumed breath warmed the baron's neck. The latter, stirred to the innermost depths of his being, turned around and looked at the window he would have liked to open.

"Jacques, my dear, no seduction, or I shall call the police."

Jacques burst out laughing.

"A seduction in riding habit? Oh! How depraved you are! Baron, you are impossible!"

But Jacques's laughter was rather nervous.

"Well, you would appeal to me less if you wore a velvet coat!" Raittolbe replied foolishly.

Jacques sulked, and when he saw the monster pouting, Raittolbe rushed to the window:

"I am choking," he gasped.

When he came back to Jacques, he was on the couch shaking with irrepressible laughter.

"Go! Jacques," he said, raising his riding whip.

Then, lowering his arm:

"Go, Jacques!" he said, his voice almost failing him. "Go, for this time you might really be killed."

Jacques seized his arm:

"We don't know how to fight well enough yet," he said, dragging him by force to their horses prancing outside.

They dined at the Vénérande mansion side by side, without making any allusion to the scene of the afternoon, which might shake Raoule's confidence.

One night, Mme Silvert went alone to the azure temple. Venus' bed was left empty, the incense burner was not lighted, and Raoule did not put on her evening suit.

Jacques, who had gone after lunch to a fencing match of renowned experts, had not come back.

About midnight Raoule was still doubting the possibility of a betrayal. Her eyes fell mechanically on the cupid holding up the curtain; she thought she could detect a mocking expression on his face. She felt her blood freezing in her veins . . . With a terrifying fright, she ran to the back of the room, to get a dagger hidden behind her portrait, and placed it in her bodice.

She heard footsteps in the dressing room.



Jeanne was shouting: "Monsieur!"

She was taking it on herself to announce him, so that she might reassure Madame, whose face had frightened her.

Monsieur entered a few minutes later.

Raoule went up to him with a cry of love, but he pushed her away brutally.

"What is the matter?" muttered Raoule, extremely perturbed. "Are you drunk?"

"I have just come from my sister," he said, in a broken voice. "From my sister, the prostitute...and not one of those women, do you hear, not one of those women has been able to revive what you have killed, you devil!"

He fell heavily on the nuptial bed, repeating with a leer of disgust:

"I hate women, oh I hate them!"

Overwhelmed, Raoule retreated to the wall, and fell in a faint.

#### CHAPTER XV

"My very dear sister-in-law:

If you go tonight, about eleven, to the flat of your friend, M. de Raittolbe, you'll see things which will please you.

— Marie Silvert."

That note was as brief as a slap in the face. Raoule, reading it, felt a sensation of horror; however, her courageous masculine nature prevailed.

"No!" she cried, "he may have wanted to betray his wife...but he is incapable of betraying his lover!"

During the last month Jacques had hardly left the sanctuary of love, and a month ago, one morning, he had asked pardon as a repenting *adulteress*, kissing her feet and covering her hands with tears. She had forgiven him, because, at heart, she was glad that he had proved to himself that he was at the mercy of her hellish power. Was it necessary that from the lower depths a new insult should arise?

But she knew also...she knew only too well, that healthy and fresh flesh is sovereign of the world. She had said it so often in their maddest, most voluptuous, and most subtle nights since Jacques's orgiastic night. Raoule burned the note. Then its words shone in letters of fire on the walls of her drawing room. She did not want to read it again, but she saw it everywhere, from the floor to the ceiling. Raoule sent for her household retinue one after the other, and asked them:

"Do you know which way Monsieur went tonight after his promenade in the Bois?"



"Madame," answered the small groom who had held the bridle of Jacques's horse, "I think Monsieur took a cab!"

This information did not indicate what her husband's intentions were; yet why had he not come back to tell her about his outing?

She was growing absolutely idiotic! Could she hesitate? Is not human nature always ready to yield to the most extravagant of temptations? Just a year ago, had she herself not gone to Jacques instead of going to Raittolbe?

"Then," thought the grim philosopher, "he went where fate was calling him; he went where I foresaw he would go, in spite of my demoniacal caresses! Raoule, the hour of reckoning has come for you; look danger in the face, and if it is too late, punish the guilty one!"

She gave a start, because, while putting on her masculine attire so as not to be recognized in the Rue d'Antin, she was talking aloud to herself.

"Is he guilty? Who knows? Ought I not to share in a crime too often foreseen by my suspicions and to the idea of which his cowardly nature has accustomed him?"

She added, going to the service stairs that communicated with their room:

"I won't chastise him! I shall be content to destroy the idol, because one can't adore a fallen god!" And she left, looking straight ahead, with a quiet face, but with a torn heart...

In the Rue d'Antin, the concierge told her:

"Monsieur de Raittolbe is not seeing anyone."

Then, winking because he saw that this elegant young man must be an intimate friend:

"There is a lady with him."

"A lady!" stammered Mme Silvert.

An atrocious supposition came to her mind at once. He might have gone to his sister first... at his sister's there were sizes to suit everybody!

"Well, my friend, that's why I'd like to see him!..."

"But it is impossible, Monsieur le Baron is very strict about such matters."

"Did he give you any orders?..."

"No... No need... one can guess!..."

Raoule went up, without condescending to turn back and rang the bell at the door of the mezzanine. M. Raittolbe's man answered, his finger to his mouth.

"Monsieur is not seeing anyone!"

"Here is my card. He'll have to see me!"



She had one of her husband's cards in the pocket of her coat.

"Monsieur Silvert," stammered the bewildered servant, "but . . ."

"But," said Raoule, trying to laugh, "my wife is here, and I know it! Are you afraid that I shall make a scene? Don't worry! A police inspector is not following me . . ."

She handed him a bank note and closed the door behind them.

"It is true, Monsieur," murmured the poor man, terrified, "I announced Madame Silvert hardly a quarter of an hour ago, I swear . . ."

Raoule went quickly through the dining room and entered the smoking room, carefully closing after her each door she opened.

The smoking room was lighted by only one candle, laid on a pier table. M. de Raittolbe was standing near that table, holding a revolver in his hand.

Raoule made a single bound. He also wanted to kill himself? Who had betrayed him? A loved human being, or his moral courage? . . .

She seized the revolver, and her attack was so sudden, so unexpected, that Raittolbe let go of it; it dropped to the floor.

"You?" stammered the ex-officer, as pale as death.

"Yes, you must speak before you blow out your brains, I demand it. After that . . . Well! you may do as you like! . . ."

She appeared so calm that Raittolbe thought she knew nothing.

"Jacques is here!" he said, in a throaty voice.

"I thought as much, since your servant announced him a short while ago."

"Dressed as a woman!" exclaimed Raittolbe, his words full of insensate rage.

"Why not!"

And they looked at each other with a frightening stare.

"Where is he?"

"In my room!"

"What is he doing?"

"He is crying!"

"You refused!"

"I wanted to strangle him," roared Raittolbe.

"Yes! But later you wanted to blow out your brains?"

"I confess, yes!"

"Why?"

Raittolbe had no answer ready. Crushed, the rake sank down on the sofa.

"My honor is more sensitive than yours!" he said at last.

Then Raoule went to the bedroom. A few minutes, which seemed like centuries to the baron, went by.



Then a woman reappeared, clothed in a long, plain, black velvet dress, her head covered with a mantilla. That woman was Mme Silvert, née Raoule de Vénérande. Pale and unsteady, her husband was following her; he had put up the collar of his coat to hide the red finger marks on his neck.

"Baron," said Mme Silvert, in a very assured voice, "I have been caught *flagrante delicto*, but my husband does not wish for a public scandal. He will await you, tomorrow, with his witnesses, at the outskirts of the Vésinet."

"That's enough, Madame!" he murmured: "Only the *flagrante delicto* can't be proved by your husband, because Madame Silvert, I swear, is not guilty!"

And he laid his hand on his rosette of the Legion of Honor.

"I believe you, Monsieur!"

She bowed as an adversary and went away, her arm around Jacques's waist. Going out of the smoking room, she turned on the threshold:

"To the death!" she whispered simply to Raittolbe, who was seeing her out.

The valet said later, about that strange adventure:

"Madame Silvert, whom I would have sworn as blond as corn when she came in, was as black as soot when she went out. In any case, she is a very stunning woman!"

It was Raoule herself who awoke Jacques next day at dawn; she gave him the addresses of her two witnesses.

"Go," she said very sweetly, "and don't be frightened. It is a fencing match in the open air, instead of in a fencing room!"

Jacques rubbed his eyes, like someone not aware of what he is doing; he had slept in his clothes on his silken bed:

"Raoule," he muttered bad humoredly, "it is your fault! I only wanted to joke, that's all!"

"Of course," she said, smiling with an adorable smile, "I love you still!"

They kissed each other.

"You'll do your duty as an outraged husband, you'll get a slight scratch, and that will be my only vengeance. Your opponent is warned: he must be lenient!"

"But, Raoule, suppose he does not obey you?" murmured Jacques, rather uneasy.

"He will obey me!"

Raoule's tone allowed no reply.

Jacques, however, though his imagination was rendered foggy and



stupid by vice, still saw before him Raittolbe's threatening face, and he could not understand why she, the *husband*, forgave him so easily.

He found the carriage waiting near the steps, entered it mechanically, and went to the given address.

Martin Durand accepted without demur the responsibility of being a witness in an unknown affair. But Cousin René, guessing that it had to do with some escapade of Raoule's, did not find it *amusing* to be asked to defend Jacques Silvert's honor. He yielded only when told it was merely a quarrel about fencing.

Then, as Jacques had married a de Vénérande, and therefore belonged to their *nobility*, the cousin joined Martin Durand.

The two witnesses, not knowing what the trouble was, exchanged only a few words. Jacques Silvert reclined in the most padded corner of the carriage and went to sleep.

"Alexander!" said René, pointing to Raoule's husband and grinning.

"Of course," answered Martin Durand, "he is fighting for the sake of the world. Raittolbe probably has to show him a new thrust. Isn't he complacent, the husband!"

René looked haughty and stopped short the architect's unfortunate remark.

After a quarter of an hour Jacques, awakened by his witnesses, jumped down at the outskirts of the forest. It took them some time to find their adversary. Everything in that duel was extraordinary, and the place of rendezvous was no more definite than its real motive.

Raittolbe appeared at last, bringing with him two ex-officers. Jacques knew how to salute an opponent, and he saluted.

"Very gallant, more and more gallant!" René asserted.

Then the witnesses went up, and Jacques, to look like a real man, lit a cigarette offered by Martin Durand.

It was in March, and the weather was gray but rather warm. It had been raining the night before, and the buds on the trees shone with a thousand shining drops. Looking up, Jacques could not help smiling with his vague smile, which had all the spirituality of his soft nature. What was he smiling at? Well, he did not know; only those drops of water had seemed to him like eyes tenderly gazing at fate, and he felt joy in his heart.

When he saw the country, with Raoule on his arm, the body of the terrible creature shut out everything for him.

And he loved her very deeply, that woman . . . it was true that he had offended her very deeply for the sake of that man who had hurt his neck so much . . .



He looked down again. Violets were showing through the grass. Then, just as the raindrops had put spangles in his dim brain, the small dark eyes of the flowers, half hidden by the blades of grass like eyelashes, made his brain still more dim. He saw the sad, muddy earth, and he shivered at the thought of being laid there some morning, never to rise again. Yes, indeed, he had offended the woman; but why had that man hurt his neck so much? . . . And it was not his fault! . . . Prostitution is a disease! They all had had it in his family: his mother, his sister; could he struggle against his own blood? . . . He was so much like a whore in the depths of his being, that the madness of vice took the proportions of tetanus! And besides, what he had dared to wish for was really much more natural than what she had taught him! And he shook his red hair in the wind as he thought of these things! They were going to show off, as they parried each other's blows.

"On guard, gentlemen!"

They would fight till he had the promised scratch, and then he would return quickly, to make her drink in a kiss the red pearl, no larger than the pearls of rain . . .

. . . And yet this man hurt his neck very much . . .

The choice of arms belonged to Raittolbe. He chose. When Jacques took his sword in his hand, he was surprised to find it heavy. Those he used generally were very light. The customary "Go, gentlemen!" was said.

As usual Jacques handled his weapon very awkwardly.

The baron did not wish to look Jacques straight in the face, but the young man was so calm and silent that Raittolbe felt his blood run cold.

"Let us hurry," he thought, "let us rid society of a foul creature!"

Just then the dawn broke through the gray sky. A ray of sunshine fell on the fighters, and especially on Jacques, whose open shirt showed the hollow of his chest, and a skin as delicate as a child's, with fine golden hair that only accentuated the whiteness of his body.

Raittolbe feinted and Jacques parried, but rather timidly. He also was in a hurry to end it. Suppose the baron made a mistake? His fist was terrible, he had reason to know. It was the religious silence that oppressed him! At least Raoule amused him with her biting comments when she gave him lessons, and he felt he wanted to look beautiful.

Raittolbe hesitated a few minutes. An awful anguish tightened his heart and a cold perspiration covered his body.

Jacques, all pink, looked happy! Then that damned creature was not a coward; did he not understand, was he not defending himself? The thrusts of the sword seemed to make no more impression on his god-like limbs than did the riding whip.



Then, not wishing to see what was going to happen, he lunged quickly and turned his head away a little, touching Jacques just where his red curly hair shone like gold. It seemed to him as if his sword penetrated by itself into the flesh of a newborn babe. Jacques did not utter a sound, but fell on the grass where the dark little eyes of the violets were watching him. But Raittolbe uttered a harrowing cry that went to the heart of the witnesses.

"I am a scoundrel!" he said, in the tone of a father who accidentally has killed his son. "I have killed him! I have killed him!"

He ran to the outstretched corpse.

"Jacques!" he begged. "Look at me! Speak to me! Jacques, why did you come? Did you not know that you were condemned beforehand? Oh! It is an atrocity, I can't have killed him, I who love him! Say I can't, say it is not true. Am I dreaming?..."

The witnesses, distressed by this unexpected outburst of sorrow, were trying to calm him, and to raise Jacques.

"For a duel that ought to have stopped at the first sign of blood, this is a very much-to-be-regretted ending," mumbled one of the officers.

"Yes! it is a very dreadful business," muttered Martin Durand.

"And not a doctor," added René, horribly disturbed.

"I am accustomed to such things, I'll bandage him; go and get some water quickly," said the baron's second witness.

While they were getting some water, Raittolbe had put his lips to the wound and was trying to draw the blood, which was very slow in coming.

They cooled his forehead with a wet handkerchief. He opened his eyes.

"Are you alive?" asked the baron. "Oh, my child, do you forgive me?" he went on, stammering. "You did not know how to fight, you offered yourself to death."

"We assert," interrupted one of the officers, who thought that his friend was going too far, "that Monsieur de Raittolbe behaved perfectly."

"You must be suffering a lot, aren't you?" the baron went on, not listening to them. "You, for whom the least hurt was always too much. Alas! you are so unlike a man! I must have been mad to accept this duel. My poor Jacques, answer me, I beg of you!"

Silvert's eyes opened wide; a bitter smile played around his beautiful mouth, whose warm color was fast disappearing.

"No, sir," he stammered in a voice that was less than a breath, "I have nothing against you... it is my sister... who is the cause of everything... my sister!... I loved Raoule... Oh! I am cold!"

Raittolbe tried again to suck the wound because the blood was still not coming.



Then Jacques pushed him away and said, in lower tones still:

"No, leave me, your mustaches prick me..."

His body shivered as he fell backward. Jacques was dead...

"Did you notice," said one of the baron's witnesses, when the carriage had gone with the corpse, "did you notice that Raittolbe, in spite of his despair, forgot to shake hands with him?"

"Yes, this duel was as incorrect as possible in every way... I am sorry for our friend."

On the evening of that mournful day, Mme Silvert bent over the bed in the temple of love and, armed with silver pincers, a velvet-covered hammer, and a silver scalpel, engaged in a very delicate task... Occasionally she dried her tapering fingers with a lace handkerchief.

## CHAPTER XVI

The Baron de Raittolbe has gone back to the army and is in Africa. He takes part in all the dangerous expeditions. Had he not been warned that he would die by a pistol shot?

In the Vénérande mansion, in the left wing, whose shutters are always closed, there is a walled chamber.

That room is as blue as a cloudless sky, and on the bed shaped like a shell, an Eros of marble watches over a wax figure covered with transparent rubber. The red hair, the fair eyelashes, the gold hair of the chest are natural; the teeth that are in the mouth, and the nails on the hands and feet, have been torn from a corpse. The enameled eyes have an adorable look.

The walled chamber has a door hidden in the draperies of the dressing room. At night, sometimes a woman dressed in mourning, and sometimes a young man in evening clothes, opens this door.

One or the other kneels at the foot of the bed, and, after contemplating at length the marvelous lines of the wax statue, embraces it, and kisses it on the mouth. A hidden spring, installed at the inside of the hips, connects with the mouth and brings it to life.

This wax figure, an anatomical masterpiece, was fabricated by a German.

Originally published as *Monsieur Vénus* (1884).



# **A Haven**

by J.-K. Huysmans

---

Translated by Rachel Ashton

**Introduction**

by Charles Bernheimer



# *A Haven: Decadent Naturalism*

Charles Bernheimer

J.-K. Huysmans is the writer most commonly associated with the decadent period in France, yet few English-speaking readers have heard of, let alone read, any work of his other than *Against Nature* (1884). This single book has defined Huysmans's literary identity in much the same way that the artists and writers selected for critical praise by its neurotic hero, Des Esseintes, have become identified with a "decadent" sensibility. To complete his catalog of contemporary literature written "against nature" and in favor of artifice, Des Esseintes, like Don Quixote in Part Two of Cervantes's novel, could have listed the book in which he appears as a kind of summation of the genre. Indeed, his story is largely an explanation of his own literary origins, going back to late Latin literature and moving up through Poe, Flaubert, and Baudelaire to the present, with Verlaine, Villiers, and Mallarmé. Thus the book innovates by analyzing how it is derivative. The first work in a tradition, it also presents itself as the last.

The self-enclosed, reflexive quality of *Against Nature*, which is, of course, psychological as well as literary, accounts in part for the ease with which the novel has been isolated in literary history from the rest of Huysmans's very considerable oeuvre. Labeled by Arthur Symonds "the breviary of the Decadence,"<sup>1</sup> *Against Nature* rapidly became a kind of source book for decadent themes, motifs, behaviors, and attitudes. The very structure of Huysmans's novel, which incorporates much alien literary material, may have seemed to justify the incorporation in turn of sections of his text. Such at least was the practice of Oscar Wilde, whose Dorian Gray undertakes the study of perfumes, music, and jewels in paragraphs that echo, both in subject and style, Huysmans's account of Des Esseintes's researches. Wilde does acknowledge, famously, that Dorian was influenced by a certain "yellow book," whose plot bears a striking resemblance to that of *Against Nature*.<sup>2</sup> But Huysmans's English admirer fails to give the book's title, nor does he indicate that Dorian's aesthetic inquiries were undertaken in direct imitation of those of his French precursor. Granted, this is no isolated instance of Wilde's unscrupulous borrowing, but in this case his is only the most egregious of many similar acts of appropriation. Just as Dorian considers Des Esseintes "a kind of prefiguring type of himself,"<sup>3</sup>



so writers wishing to identify with the sensibility synthesized by Huysmans plundered his prefiguring fiction as a pseudosacred origin (note how tenaciously Symons's term "breviary," sometimes converted to "bible," has stuck).

So successful has *Against Nature* been in defining and embodying decadence that no other work by Huysmans has been so canonized. The book has come to represent in itself one distinct phase of Huysmans's literary-religious trajectory from naturalism to decadence to satanism to Catholicism. The author himself encouraged this mapping of his career. In the preface he wrote to *Against Nature* twenty years after its publication, he declared that this novel represents a complete break with its naturalist precursors, *The Vatard Sisters* (1879), *En ménage* (1881), and *Down Stream* (1882), and that its true significance lies in the way it foreshadows his conversion. From his Catholic perspective, Huysmans reads the underlying thematic continuity of his work teleologically as revealing "the progress of Grace."<sup>4</sup> I would argue, however, that a psychological reading reveals that what Huysmans interprets as progress is actually repetition and that his naturalist writings express the same obsessions that find their final contextual mold in Catholic doctrine. Huysmans's constant return to certain obsessive themes and images breaks down his categorical division of his literary production and suggests that a broadened interpretation of the meaning of decadence can justly be applied to the majority of his works.

In his 1903 preface to *Against Nature*, Huysmans makes it seem as though early adherence to the school of naturalism had been a kind of enabling expedient, a convenient way of launching himself as a writer. He presents naturalism as a set of formulas codified by Zola and imitated more or less successfully by disciples like himself. By 1883, he explains, he had come to feel that these formulas were exhausted and that naturalism was worn out and turning in circles. He felt this obscurely, not with the clarity necessary to deliberately cast naturalism aside and undertake a new mode of writing. Out of this obscurity emerged *Against Nature*, a work Huysmans calls "entirely unconscious, imagined without preconceived ideas" (AR 59). Thus, he opposes the unconscious origins of the decadent aesthetic to the all-too-conscious preconceptions of naturalist orthodoxy, implying that that the unconscious is the agent through which the work of redemptive grace, disabled by the crassly material insistence of naturalism, first manifested itself in his writing. But this is a story for the converted. Huysmans's naturalism is as powerfully invested with unconscious motivations as is



his decadence, his occultism, and his Catholicism. Although the plots may change, what motivates them remains remarkably the same.

It is, I think, largely because literary critics tend to buy into their own narrative of progress that they, like Huysmans himself, have had a hard time figuring out the novel he wrote immediately after *Against Nature*. "I understand nothing of what happened between the year 1884 and the year 1891, between *Against Nature* and *Là-bas*" (AR 76), Huysmans declared in 1903. He does not even mention *A Haven*, published in 1886, as if he had no way of plotting its meaning. Critics have similarly been unable to classify *A Haven* as either naturalist or decadent and have tended to see the novel as a confused juxtaposition of the two modes. This was Zola's opinion, to whom Huysmans deferentially replied: "As for your opinion on the two legs of this pair of trousers, one down-to-earth [i.e., naturalistic] and the other up-in-the-air [i.e., the dream sequences with their decadent imagery], it is — alas! — mine also."<sup>5</sup> But it is precisely this confusion of literary modes that is, in my opinion, of critical interest, for it demonstrates that decadence does not constitute a break with naturalism so much as it displays naturalism's unconscious on another stage.

If *Against Nature* is a book written against nature as the supposed source of aesthetic pleasure and ethical value, *A Haven* is a book written against nature as the supposed source of inner peace, physical vitality, and spiritual renewal. The latter are what Jacques and Louise Marles hope to find in fleeing financial disaster and nervous exhaustion in Paris for the deserted château of Lourps in the rural countryside. They are looking for *une rade* in the sense of a safe, calm haven "where they could drop anchor and plan their next move (p. 381), but instead they find themselves *laissés en rade* in the sense of being left in the lurch, stranded, forgotten. Huysmans's title has some of the doubleness Freud finds in the German word *unheimlich*, "uncanny"; the *rade* can be thought of as a temporary home, a refuge, a protected haven, but it is also the opposite, a place where one is abandoned, left behind, left homeless and exposed.

The novel suggests that two agents are primarily responsible for this turn whereby a potential home becomes alien, strange, and inhospitable: nature and dreams.

Rather than a refuge against the natural elements, the château of Lourps offers vivid evidence of their corrosive, dissolving force. The derelict château is characterized by its permeability: wind enters through broken windows; rain pours in from leaky roofs; humidity seeps through porous walls; screech owls haunt empty corridors; the



surrounding park has no protective wall, making it possible for anyone to enter. Everything within the château is in the process of dissolution: wood paneling is crumbling into powder, floorboards are loose and rotting, humidity has stained wallpaper that is becoming unglued, doors are warped and split, chunks of plaster are falling from ruinous ceilings, a deathly odor of mold and decomposition pervades all. No barrier, no division can hold its own against the invasive, erosive, contaminating force of natural decay. As Alain Buisine remarks about Huysmans's imaginative universe, "the inside is never sheltered from the outside. The membrane that should separate the internal from the external leaks all over. It is a repugnant magma: everything gets mixed together, mutually interpenetrates and contaminates in an atrocious confusion."<sup>6</sup>

The onslaught of the forces of organic decay against the château is paralleled in the garden surrounding it by the onslaught of the forces of vegetative growth. Like the Paradou described in Zola's *The Sin of Father Mouret*, to which Huysmans is clearly indebted here, the garden at Lourps was once carefully planted and cultivated according to plan. Now it is completely overgrown: "All the cultivated flowers in the beds were dead. There was an inextricable tangle of roots and creepers, an invasion of couch grass, an assault of garden vegetables whose seeds had been carried there by the wind, inedible legumes with woolly pulp and flesh, deformed and soured by their solitude in a fallow soil" (p. 401). Nature outdoors is anything but peaceful and appeasing: it is in disorder, chaotic, crazy. It bursts, probes, climbs, creeps, smothers, wounds, and rots. In the end, organic fertility and organic decay have the same degenerative, disintegrative effect. Thus, Jacques feels that the forest and garden, instead of offering him some relief from the castle's atmosphere of oppressive decay, are actually "an imaginatively analogous milieu" that repeats its "sickly, dull melancholy" (p. 403).

As to the world of the peasants, it is physically repulsive rather than pastorally soothing. When Jacques learns that the old peasant couple, Antoine and Norine, still go at it every night, he is "filled with an immense disgust for those ridiculous shudders" (p. 466). This repulsion is similar to the nausea that overwhelms him when he witnesses the birth of a calf, which comes into the world as an "enormous, sticky mass" (p. 413). Covered with a bloody mucus, it resembles, writes Huysmans, the underdone meat served in a cheap restaurant. Absent from Huysmans's description is the ambivalence about animal fertility with which Zola ends *The Sin of Father Mouret*, in which the calf's birth, coming at the very moment of the heroine's burial, suggests both



regeneration and degeneration, both celebratory renewal and nauseating repetition. Huysmans, in contrast, sees nothing of the positive: the organic/sexual cycle of birth, growth, fertilization, death, decay, and new birth appears in this novel as a horrifying torment. At best, it can be viewed with a kind of macabre black humor, as when Jacques fantasizes about the possibility of capturing the essence of a dead person in a perfume or flavoring, thus enabling a bereaved husband to sprinkle the spiritual distillate of his late adored wife onto his pocket handkerchief or a grieving daughter to treat her son to a dessert aromatized with the sweet-and-sour taste of granddaddy. (André Breton, who considered *A Haven* an inspired forerunner of his own modernism and who praised Huysmans for having been "the first to penetrate the histological constitution of the real," selected the pages on funerary perfumes for his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*.<sup>7</sup>)

Ironically, what Jacques and Louise have found in their rural retreat is the perfect external correlative of the debilitated, morbid, nervous state of mind that their move to the country was supposed to cure. Most specifically, the move repeats Jacques's experience with Louise's illness, for he had married her expecting "a blessed haven [*une bien-heureuse rade*], in a cushioned ark, sheltered from the wind" (p. 429). Jacques had counted on Louise's dependence on him — she was a penniless orphan — to assure that she would remain silent, devoted, and undemanding. But Louise's disease, "this disconcerting nervous madness" (p. 428), destroyed her husband's chauvinist dream of female subservience. He feels, it could be said, that she has left him *en rade*, abandoned and defenseless. Whereas he had wanted an efficient, protective, practical housewife — a haven in a hostile world — she has exposed him to domestic chaos. In Paris, for example, she allowed the incompetent maid to buy food as rotten as the vegetables in the garden at Lourps. Indeed, Louise's whole organism is as porous, as subject to morbid infiltrations, as the decaying château. Initially affecting only her physical health, her disease "infiltrated her mind" (p. 428) and finally became a "malaise of the entire organism . . . whose roots extended everywhere and yet were nowhere to be seen" (p. 427). Sickly Louise is like sickly Lourps, where corridors and rooms succeed each other in a labyrinth as bewildering as the present-absent roots of Louise's malaise, and harvest bugs so torture the anguished couple that they scratch their skin until it bleeds. Louise is a punctured vessel, a hemorrhaging bark in ruin.

That Louise's disease cannot be diagnosed by the medical specialists only serves to associate it all the more closely with the very essence of



her sexual nature. The illness first appeared after marriage, as a result of "internal disorders" (p. 428) that Louise shamefully tried to hide, implying a sexual or gynecological etiology. One of the symptoms is metritis, inflammation of the uterus, which makes intercourse painful, and the couple has practiced abstinence for what may now be years. Another symptom is convulsions in the legs, accompanied by hallucinations and fainting spells. In the late nineteenth century, such manifestations would have been considered typical of hysteria and Louise's convulsed pose might have been identified as one of the "*attitudes passionnelles*" documented in the *Iconographie photographique* of the Salpêtrière hospital, domain of that acknowledged master of hysteria, Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot.<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, however, the word *hysteria* is not used in reference to Louise. Instead, a closely related disease, nervous chlorosis, is mentioned (p. 488). Its etiology was often thought to involve a refusal of sexuality, thus making it practically indistinguishable, according to the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* (1876), from "sensitive hysteria."<sup>9</sup> In any case, Louise's illness, and the consequent demise of physical desire, has laid bare what Jacques, like his creator, considers "the original flaw of woman" (*la tare originelle de la femme*) (p. 485).

This defect is a generative source of Huysmans's naturalism, as it is of Zola's. Woman, the original home, the original safe haven, is defective, unsound, faulty, tainted. She does not provide the desired protection from assault. Rather, she is cracked, split, wounded — the idea of castration imposes itself whether one is psychoanalytically inclined or not. The "initial organic lesion"<sup>10</sup> that determines the history of the Rougon-Macquart family, read in fantasy terms, is the wound of castration. Huysmans's attraction to Zola's school can thus be explained at the deep level of the unconscious: for Zola, as for Huysmans, nature itself is uncanny because it is the domain of the feminine, a domain that is constitutionally defective, lacking, even pathological.

Like a surprising number of fin-de-siècle male artists and writers, both Zola and Huysmans are at once disgusted and fascinated by what they take to be the morbidity of (female) nature. In *The Sin of Father Mouret*, Zola seems to want to counteract this fantasy by portraying the luxuriant exuberance of organic fertility in a prelapsarian Garden of Eden. But the archetype fails: the garden is full of teeming biological generation that feeds death and decay and of female sexual energy that advocates copulation. Zola's virginal heroine, Albine, wants to provide an innocent, consoling haven to the man she loves, and she intuitively feels that sexual intercourse is the natural — hence healthy and good —



fulfillment of their romantic intimacy. But Zola shows that sexuality is corrupt and degraded precisely *because* it is natural. After they make love, both Serge and Albine immediately feel shame, and in Serge's mind Albine changes irredeemably from savior to castrated vampiric monster.

Jacques Marles does not experience any such sudden, violent repulsion. His is, rather, a gradual disillusionment and alienation, a slow realization that the decaying, degenerative natural world around him expresses the inner truth of Woman. First he imagines that Louise is declining atavistically toward her peasant origins and beginning to resemble the brutish Norine. Then, in the novel's last chapter, he fantasizes an analogy between Louise and the half-paralyzed cat she has adopted, which is dying horribly of convulsions, vomiting, salivating, suffocating, meowing, morbidly sensitive to touch — excruciating details Huysmans describes at length. Still, Jacques does not abandon his wife. Although he sees that "the tranquillity of [their] lives is dead" (p. 491), he returns with her to Paris. Out of devotion to marital duty, he checks the violence of his fear and loathing. But these feelings come out anyway, in dreams. Indeed, at one point Jacques intuits the connection: he wonders if Paracelsus might not be right that nightmares are caused by menstrual blood.

Jacques's first dream evokes images of decadence closely related to those made famous in *Against Nature*. Expendng a good deal of mental energy in trying to figure out the meaning of this dream, he identifies the primary figures as the biblical Esther appearing in her virginal beauty before the aging but lascivious King Assuerus. But he is unable to understand why his unconscious should have produced this scene or what relevance it might have to his life. Huysmans thus invites his reader to go beyond Jacques's censoring blockage and to discover motives revealed by the text that are unavailable to Jacques's conscious mind. The reader is encouraged, in other words, to establish thematic continuities between the dream text and the text of the dreamer's everyday experience and thereby to arrive at a deeper understanding of Jacques's psychology. But the explicit echoes in the dream of imagery introduced in *Against Nature* suggest a second aspect to the invitation: the dream offers not only a way into the unconscious of Jacques Marles but also into the unconscious of Huysmanian textuality. The motivations driving this dream are not only those of an author deliberately constructing a literary character, including contrived fantasmatic scenarios, but also the less conscious obsessions of an author who cannot help but repeat himself.<sup>11</sup>



What does the dream teach us about Jacques that he cannot learn from it on his own? At its core is the fantasy of a king's absolute power over the female object of his desire. What makes Esther desirable (to give her that name for simplicity's sake) is the degree to which her body is veiled, attenuated, and aestheticized. She is so small, thin, and undeveloped that she appears "*presque garçonniere*," almost boyish (p. 393). Her tiny, frail physique is encased in a fabulously decorated jeweled dress, her skin has been deliberately emptied of color, an undefinable perfume of complexly layered scents emanates from her white flesh. Standing immobile before the king, she is woman fetishized as art object, her animal odor eliminated, the evidence of blood in her veins denied by her "supernatural pallor" (p. 393). Such, it would seem, is Jacques's fantasy of the ideal woman — the opposite of his wife, whose female morbidity is manifested by her illness. Even naked, Esther remains a perfect object of misogynist scopic delectation, for her slender body, with its aestheticizing circles of gold around breasts and navel and its golden pubic hair, suggests nothing of the mature, desiring, self-assertive woman. The dreamer happily imagines her virginal fear of penetration, "the corporeal pain of a wound" (p. 394). But then he obscures the scene of violation, preferring to contemplate attractive metaphorical substitutions (fireworks, rods, plowing, sewing of jewels, and so forth) and to offer an afterview of the king with his pale victim draped over his crimson-clad knees.

Read in this manner, the dream is comprehensible in terms of what we know of Jacques's desire for a wife who would cater quietly and obediently to his kingly commands and hide as much as possible the "intimate ablutions" (p. 484) of her mature sexual body. It is also comprehensible as a text emanating from Huysmans's own fantasy life as this has already been created for the reader in previous texts. The palace of the king whom Jacques identifies as Assuerus resembles that of Herod as painted by Gustave Moreau and described by Des Esseintes in *Against Nature* — a similar mixture of architectural styles evokes the religious atmosphere of a basilica; similar cold, shiny surfaces of marble and porphyry reflect the sparkling gleams of precious stones (in *A Haven* an entire harvest of grapes and vineyards is imitated to petrified perfection by a spectacular array of exotic gems). And just as the bejeweled, perfumed Salome performs her lascivious dance before the aging, panting Herod, so Esther is presented as a sexual offering to Assuerus, who, in a blatantly symbolic gesture, "extends the diamond tulip of his scepter toward her" (p. 395). The major difference is that Salome, whom Des Esseintes calls "the symbolic deity of Lust, the im-



mortal goddess of Hysteria" (AR 149), seduces a reluctant king, whereas Esther is purely the object of royal desire. The fearful phantasm of the femme fatale has been tamed, much as Salome's power was checked by the petrifying apparition of Saint John's decapitated head in the second Moreau painting evoked in *Against Nature*.

Massive petrification as a strategy to deny the overwhelming female power of organic life provides the scenario for Jacques's second dream. He finds himself with his wife on the moon, "where there was neither vapor, nor vegetation, nor earth, nor water, nothing but rocks and streams of lava" (p. 422). Everything here is arid, hard, whitened, odorless, and silent. Gaston Bachelard, who gives a suggestive phenomenological analysis of this dream in *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté*, is right to say that it expresses a raging hostility against life.<sup>12</sup> But one needs to recognize furthermore that life in Huysmans is gendered female. At one point, the dreamer imagines that the landscape resembles enormous surgical instruments, such as medical saws and scalpels, as if the weapons of life's violent amputation had become frozen into the scene of death. Likewise, the natural agents of destructive rage are not annihilated in the dream but preserved in petrified form. Observing calcified cataracts, petrified avalanches, anesthetized tempests, and sedentary maelstroms, Jacques wonders "what tremendous compression of the ovaries had checked the sacred illness, the epilepsy of this world, the hysteria of this planet" (p. 425). The reference is to one of Charcot's techniques for the treatment of hysteria, pressure applied to the ovaries. Huysmans takes the old trope of moon-as-woman and replaces its romantic connotations with decadent ones: the moon here is woman as clamorous lunatic, as convulsive epileptic.

The dream fulfills the wish — both Jacques's and Huysmans's — to see sickly female energy, originating in "incurable wounds" (p. 424), deactivated, immobilized, rendered impotent. To this end, the diseases associated with female sexuality must not just be summarily eradicated: the neutralization of their effects must be visually witnessed and described. Hence the evocation of mineral formations resembling chancres, tubercles, and cysts, all symptoms of venereal disease. Similarly, the Swamp of Putridity is identified only the better to evoke the smell of saponifying cadavers and decomposing blood that does not emanate from it. Thus, naturalist effects of biological and hysterical degeneration exist on the decadent moon, but only insofar as they have been eviscerated, frozen, petrified. They are simulacra, offering a purely externalized surface with no organic interiority. What is factitious and artificial exhibits the spectacle of life in all its putrescent



decomposition but without the biological motor that generates its entropic energy.

Alain Buisine has argued that embalmed simulacra of this kind, which "replace the depth of fleshy bodies by surfaces that elude the dichotomy of the organic and inorganic," attract Huysmans because they allow him to acknowledge the syphilitic pathology of life and simultaneously freeze it into inanimation.<sup>13</sup> This strategy is central to Des Esseintes's enterprise in *Against Nature*: the exotic flowers he collects are spectacularly morbid, leprous, and ulcerated, and also brilliantly synthetic, cold, and metallic. The strategic problem, of course, is that simulacra are reassuring only when viewed from outside. They do not provide an existential model for how to be in the world. One can appreciate the brilliance of an embalmer's work, but one would not want to be its object.

Except, that is, if the embalmer were God, which is one way of understanding Huysmans's conversion and of reading his hagiography of Saint Lydwine. Her horribly wounded and disfigured body — whose gangrenous infections, purulent ulcers, and pustulant tumors Huysmans details with evident relish — are filled with the Divine Word as if with embalming fluid. The miraculous consequence is that Lydwine lives thirty-nine years in her devastated state, which is contained in and by God's purpose: "By a constant miracle, [He] made of these wounds veritable censers of perfume; the plasters which they took off, teeming with vermin, sweetly scented the air; all that came from her had a delicate aroma."<sup>14</sup> Catholic doctrine allows Huysmans to dwell on the decomposing, castrated female organism while seeing it as overcoming physical disintegration through union with the mystical body of Christ.

Indeed, it took the power of Christ to invest the world with simulacra whose transcendent reality Huysmans could accept as entirely free of organic depth. Before his conversion, he was unable to stabilize his imagination's dialectical movement, whose poles Bachelard identifies as "stone and wound, pus and cinders."<sup>15</sup> For instance, in *Against Nature* he evokes a mineralized, lunar landscape that prefigures the much longer moon dream in *A Haven*. This desiccated landscape appears in Des Esseintes's nightmare as an apparent antidote to, or refuge from, the terrifying figure of Syphilis, which is pursuing him. But the desolate, arid, lunar atmosphere is not sufficiently life-denying to prevent the emergence from its sterile soil of a female figure, who rapidly turns into a terrifying embodiment of Woman — bloody, castrated, pulsating with insatiable lust.



This figure reappears transposed in Jacques Marles's third dream. Its bizarre imagery is permeated with sexual anxiety. Many of the images evoke castration: the dreamer loses his cane, on which he imagines that his entire life depends; a young woman who seems at first to be attractively adolescent and virginal, so undeveloped physically that, like Esther in the first dream, she could almost be male, turns out to be bleeding from wounds in her hips and to have eyes that, in horrifying fashion, repeatedly fall out of their blazing crimson sockets; this woman is transformed finally into a disgusting hag, whose toothless mouth is streaked with bands of blood. When Jacques identifies this "abominable whore" (p. 476) with Truth, it is as if the Huysmanian imagination were defining the obsessive center of its naturalism, the fantasy that woman is a hideously wounded, bleeding creature, whose castrating power derives from the very horror of her castration and whose prostituted sexuality is a syphilitic virus infecting the entire organic world. This repellent vision finds its delirious culmination in the fantasy Huysmans attributes to the mass murderer Gilles de Rais in *Là-Bas*:

On the tree trunks Gilles now sees disturbing polyps, horrible gnarls. He becomes aware of exostoses and ulcers, of deeply-cut wounds, chancrous tubercles, atrocious blights; it is a leprosarium of the earth, a venereal clinic of trees, among which a red hedge suddenly comes into view . . . [whose] falling leaves tinged with crimson make him feel as if he were being soaked in a rain of blood.<sup>16</sup>

This hallucination expresses a naturalist nightmare, the biological process of pathogenic generation breaking down the barriers between animal and vegetable realms and infecting the world with venereal morbidity. The imagery traditionally associated with decadence, which privileges the external and superficial, the inorganic and petrified, the artificial and aesthetic, is generated in a dialectical relationship with such naturalist fantasies. This dialectic moves easily between its poles because, in an important sense, naturalism is itself against nature, against nature as healthy, beautiful, normative, healing. Thus Zola's Father Mouret, as nauseated by pullulating biological fecundity as is Jacques Marles, wishes for a death that would save him from all putrefaction and for a world, not unlike the moon in Jacques's dream, where sexuality would be extinct, his senses would no longer function, and nothing would grow.<sup>17</sup> Although the way naturalism includes or implies decadence may be less evident than the way decadence sub-



sumes naturalism, similar fantasies drive the conflictual energies that literary history has harnessed rather arbitrarily under these two nominal banners.

#### NOTES

1. Arthur Symons, "J.-K. Huysmans," *Fortnightly Review* (March 1892). Quoted in Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 78.
2. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings* (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 111.
3. *Ibid.*
4. J.-K. Huysmans, "Preface Written Twenty Years After the Novel," in *A Rebours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 70. Hereafter abbreviated AR. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in the essay are my own.
5. Quoted by Baldick, p. 104, from a letter of June 1887.
6. Alain Buisine, "Le Taxidermiste," *Revue des sciences humaines* 43:170-71 (April-September 1978), p. 63. Other articles of value on *A Haven* are Jean Borie's preface to the Folio edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1984) and Françoise Gaillard, "En rade, ou le roman des énergies bloquées," in *Le Naturalisme: Colloque de Cérisy* (Paris: 10/18, 1978).
7. André Breton, *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1940), p. 110.
8. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Macula, 1982).
9. Quoted by Jean Starobinski, "Sur la chlorose," *Romantisme* (1981), p. 127.
10. Emile Zola, "Préface" to *Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 1 (Paris: Pléiade, 1960), p. 3.
11. For an excellent discussion of the role of dreams in Huysmans, see Françoise Carmignani-Dupont, "Fonction romanesque du récit de rêve: l'exemple d'*A Rebours*," *Littérature* 43 (October 1981), pp. 57-74.
12. Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (Paris: Corti, 1948), pp. 205-20.
13. Buisine, "Le Taxidermiste," p. 68.
14. J.-K. Huysmans, *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam*, p. 1037 below. I have commented on this passage in the context of my extended discussion of Huysmans in chapter 8 of *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth Century France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
15. Bachelard, *La Terre*, p. 206.
16. J.-K. Huysmans, *Là-Bas* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 170.
17. Emile Zola, *The Sin of Father Mouret*, trans. Sandy Petrey (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 248.



## CONTENTS

CHAPTER I	381
II	391
III	398
IV	411
V	421
VI	427
VII	440
VIII	449
IX	458
X	470
XI	476
XII	486



# A HAVEN

by J.-K. Huysmans

## CHAPTER I

NIGHT WAS FALLING: Jacques Marles quickened his step. He had left behind him the hamlet of Jutigny and, following the interminable road from Bray-sur-Seine to Longueville, he was looking on his left for the path a peasant had told him of, a shortcut to the château of Lourps.

"What a dog's life!" he murmured, hanging his head, and he thought desperately about the deplorable state of his affairs. In Paris, losing his fortune after the irremissible bankruptcy of an overingenious banker; menacing lines of black tomorrows on the horizon; at home, a pack of creditors, sensing his failure, barking at his door so fiercely that he had had to run away; at Lourps, Louise, his ailing wife, taking refuge with her uncle, the steward of a château owned by an opulent city tailor who, while waiting to sell it, left it uninhabited, unrepared, and unfurnished.

It was the only refuge on which he and his wife could now depend. Abandoned by everyone since the debacle, they thought to seek a shelter, a haven, where they could drop anchor and plan their next move during a fleeting cease-fire, before returning to Paris to begin the battle. Jacques had often been invited by old Antoine, his wife's uncle, to come and spend the summer in the empty château. This time he had accepted. His wife had left for the parish of Longueville, on the borders of which the château of Lourps stood. He had stayed on the train as far as Ormes Station, where he had gotten off with the hope of recovering a few debts.

He had visited a friend there, insolvent, or so he claimed, had suffered heated protests and unlikely promises, and, in short, had met with a flat refusal. Then, without further delay, he had retreated toward the château, where Louise, having arrived that morning, would be awaiting him.

He was tortured with anxiety. His wife's health had been misleading the medical profession for years now. The incomprehensible phases of the illness worried the specialists: a perpetual leaping from emaciation



to corpulence, thinness being substituted in less than a fortnight for plumpness, which then disappeared in turn. Then there were strange pains shooting up her legs like electric sparks, pricking her heels, boring into her knees, wringing a jolt and a cry from her. A whole procession of phenomena followed, ending in hallucinations, fainting spells, and such weakening that the death throes were beginning when, following an inexplicable reversal, the invalid came round and was revived. Since the bankruptcy, which landed her husband and her penniless and on the street, her illness had become more acute and more pronounced. That was all one could say. When there was no subject for alarm or anxiety, her enfeeblement seemed to halt, her cheeks had a little more color, her flesh grew firm. Her malady thus seemed predominantly spiritual, aggravated or held in check by events, depending on whether they were deplorable or propitious.

The journey had been particularly hard, with blackouts, acute pains, and dreadful confusion. Twenty times Jacques had been on the verge of interrupting the trip by getting off at a station and stopping at an inn, reproaching himself for having brought Louise without waiting longer. But she had insisted on remaining on the train, and he reassured himself by repeating to himself that she would have died in Paris had he not taken her away from the horrors of their impecuniosity and the shame of abusive demands for money and threatening complaints.

At the station, the sight of old Antoine waiting for his niece with a ramshackle cart to take her and her trunks away had come as a great relief, but now, exhausted by the monotony of the flat road, he let himself go, obsessed by a dread that he realized was greatly exaggerated but that oppressed and overwhelmed him nevertheless. He was almost afraid of reaching the château and finding his wife in a worse state, or even dead. He was struggling with himself; he wanted to run in order to alleviate his fears all the sooner, yet remained trembling on the road, his legs alternately nimble and slow.

Then the sight of the countryside around him momentarily suppressed his inner visions. His eyes rested on the road, trying to see, and this attentiveness diverted and stilled his heart's suffering.

On the left, he finally noticed the path that had been pointed out to him, climbing and meandering over the horizon. He passed a little cemetery with walls edged in pink tiles and turned onto a path where two hardened tracks had been dug by iron wheels. All around him stretched rows of fields, their edges blurred by the dusk that darkened them. On the hillside in the distance, a great edifice filled the sky, like a huge barn with hard, black outlines, above which flowed silent rivers of red clouds.



"I'm almost there," he told himself, for he knew that, behind this barn (actually an old church) hid the château of Lourps in its wooded grounds.

He felt a little heartened watching this building approach, with its windows on either side of the nave illuminated by the fiery clouds.

In the daylight, this black and red church, its casements and rose windows spangled with threads of lead like giant spiderwebs hanging over a furnace, seemed sinister to him. He looked higher up. Crimson waves continued to unfurl against the sky. Below, the countryside was completely deserted, the peasants tucked away, the cattle indoors. Across the stretch of plain, the only sound one could hear, far away on the hill-sides, was the nearly imperceptible bark of a dog.

A debilitating sadness overwhelmed him, a sadness different from that which had seized him during the journey. The distinctive character of his fears had disappeared; they had spread out, dilated, lost their individual essence, and, in a way, left him to mingle with that indescribable melancholy exhaled from landscapes made dull by the heavy tranquillity of evening. This vague, lachrymose distress, excluding all thought, purging the soul of its specific agonies, deadening the twinges of pain, soothing the certainty of precise suffering with its mystery, relieved him.

Arriving at the top of the hill, he turned around. It has grown darker. The immense landscape, without depth during the day, was now hollowed out like an abyss. The bottom of the valley, disappearing into darkness, seemed to sink into infinity, while its edges, drawn together by the shadows, seemed less distant. A shadowy crater was outlined there, where, in the afternoon, an amphitheater descended in gently sloping tiers.

He lingered in this mist. Then his thoughts, which had been diluted by the expanse of melancholy that enveloped him, returned to him, and, once again active in their cohesion, struck right at his heart. He thought of his wife, shuddered, and continued walking. He came up to the church, and near the portal at the bend in the path, he could make out the château of Lourps just a few paces ahead.

This sight dispelled his fears. His curiosity about the château he had heard of for so long without ever having seen, seized him for a second. He looked. The belligerent clouds had fled from the skies. The mournful silence of an ashen firmament had succeeded the solemn roar of the fiery sunset. Here and there, however, scorched embers glowed red among the smoky clouds and lit up the château from behind, hitting the roguish ridge of the roof, the barrels of the chimneys, two towers decked with bonnets like candle snuffers, one square, the other rounded. Illuminated in this way, the château resembled a ruin reduced to cinders, with a poorly extinguished fire smoldering behind it. Jacques inevitably recalled



the stories uttered by the peasant who had shown him the way. The winding path he had been following was called the Path of Fire because it had been marked out long ago, during the night, by the whole village of Jutigny trampling across the fields to rescue the blazing château.

The sight of the château, which still seemed to burn silently, exacerbated his nervous state, which since that morning had been growing worse. His sporadic bursts of apprehension and twitches of anxiety increased tenfold. He feverishly rang at a little door in the wall. The sound of the bell soothed him. He listened, his ear against the wood of the door: there was no sign of life beyond the wall. Immediately his fears ran riot. Feeling faint, he hung onto the bellpull. At last, with a crunch of gravel, the sound of wooden clogs rang out. A screeching of old iron stirred in the lock; someone pulled the door vigorously, and it shuddered but did not budge.

"Push!" said a voice.

He struck hard with his shoulder and leaned into the door, which gave way to darkness.

"It's you, my nephew," said a farmer's shadow, catching him in an embrace and rubbing his cheeks with his bristly chin.

"Yes, Uncle Antoine, and what about Louise?"

"She's here, settling in. Ah, goodness gracious! You know, my boy, it's not like the city here in the country. We don't have a lot of finery for her pleasure here, like you do."

"Yes, I know. And how is she?"

"Louise, well, she's with Norine. They've been scrubbing, sweeping, knocking about, what a rigmarole! But it keeps them happy. They're really enjoying themselves. They laugh together so loudly you don't know who to listen to anymore!"

Jacques breathed easy.

"Go to her, my boy," the old man continued. "We'll go and give 'em a hand, 'cause Norine has to go and see to the cattle. But hurry, since there's a good chance we'll get soaking wet. You've come just in time. Look at the sky, it's darkening!"

Jacques followed Uncle Antoine. On the way, he looked around. They were walking along invisible paths edged with clumps of trees, revealed by the rustling of yielding branches. Against the lighter sky, where clouds of torn tulle raced past, needle-shaped foliage, like that of pine trees, erected prickly, tremendously high treetops whose trunks planted in the shadows remained indistinct. Jacques could not imagine the appearance of the garden he was crossing. Suddenly, there was an opening, the trees gave way, and the night emptied. At the edge of the



clearing loomed the pale mass of the château, from whose threshold two women approached.

"Well, how are you?" cried Aunt Norine, flinging her stiff arms mechanically around his neck like a wooden doll.

Jacques and Louise understood each other right away.

She was better; he had come back empty-handed, without any money.

"Norine, did you put the drink in a cool place?" said old Antoine.

"Yes indeed, and just in case you dawdle, I'll go and stir the soup now."

"So, is it ready up there?" resumed the old man, turning to Louise.

"Yes, Uncle Antoine, but there's no water!"

"No water! I'll go and draw a bucket."

Aunt Norine disappeared with great strides into the darkness. Old Antoine disappeared between the trees in the opposite direction. Jacques and his wife were left alone.

"Yes, I am better," she said, kissing him. "The activity has gotten me back on my feet again. But come upstairs. I've finally discovered one room in the whole château that's almost fit to live in."

They entered a prisonlike corridor. By the light of a match he had struck, Jacques could make out enormous, sooty freestone walls dotted with dungeon doors, overhung by a ribbed vault as sheer as if it were carved into the rock itself. The smell of cisterns filled this corridor, whose paving stones wobbled at every step.

The passage rounded a corner, and he found himself in a gigantic hall whose painted marble paneling was peeling, a staircase with wrought-iron banisters before him. He went up, looking at the square stone stairwell dotted with very small windows of double crosses.

The wind rushed in through the broken windows, stirring the shadows amassed under the vault, shaking the doors on the higher floors, which groaned in the breeze.

They stopped on the first floor. "Here it is," said Louise. There were three doors: one opposite, one in a recess to the right, and one in a recess to the left.

A ray of light filtered under the first one. He entered and an inexpressible feeling of uneasiness immediately came over him. The room was very large, with the walls and the ceiling covered by wallpaper that imitated a climbing vine, in a diamond pattern of harsh green bars against an unpleasant background. Over the doors were piers of gray wood, and over the Morello marble fireplace was a small greenish looking glass whose leaking silvering dotted the surface with specks of quick-silver, framed in equally gray woodwork.

By way of a floor there were tiles once painted orange, and along the



partition walls were cupboards with paper stretched over them to form doors, paper that was torn and scratched.

Although someone had opened the window and swept, the dead room exuded a smell of old wood, rotting plaster, mildewed fabric, and cellars.

"It's so sinister in here!" thought Jacques. He looked at Louise. She did not seem frightened by the icy solitude of the room. On the contrary, she was examining it with complaisance and smiling at the looking glass that reflected her face, discolored by its greenness and pockmarked by the bubbles in the silvering.

And in fact, like most women, she was excited by the unexpected event of camping in the middle of nowhere, living like a Gypsy, putting up her tent wherever she pleased. The childish happiness a woman experiences when she breaks with habit, sees things in a new way, or cleverly plots to secure shelter for herself, the extraordinary need for ingenuity, the obligation to simulate the nomadic life of an actress on tour whom everyone's wife secretly envies, as long as it is toned down, poses no real danger, and is short-lived, the importance of being quartermaster responsible for food and lodgings, the maternal instinct, arranging a bed for the man who only has to lie on it when everything is ready, had strongly affected her and strained her nerves again.

"The furniture is not much to boast of," she said, pointing to an antique wooden bed in the recess, on which lay a box spring and a straw mattress, and in the middle of the room, to two straw chairs and a round table obviously taken from a garden where sun and rain had swollen its legs and blistered its top. "But tomorrow we'll see if we can find the things that are missing."

Jacques nodded in agreement. With one glance he took in the room, which was cluttered with trunks lying open all along the wall. Everything was bathed in gloominess, from the overly high ceiling down to the cold tiled floor.

Louise thought her husband was thinking about his money problems. She kissed him. "Come on, we'll pull through all the same," she said. And seeing he was still worried: "You must be hungry, let's go and find my uncle. We'll talk later."

Back on the landing, Jacques half opened the doors to the left and the right. He could see immense, endless corridors with rooms branching off them. Everything was completely desolate, as icy as a tomb, with crumbling walls beaten by the wind and rain.

He went downstairs but suddenly stopped short. The din of rusty chains, the screeching of unoiled wheels, the creak of a groaning pulley, shattered the night.



"What's that?"

"It's Uncle Antoine drawing water," she laughed, and then explained that water was scarce at this altitude and that a single gigantic well sunk in the courtyard served the château. "It takes exactly five minutes to draw the pail. What you hear now is the sound of the rope sawing the winch."

"Hey, there!" called old Antoine, as soon as they went into the courtyard. "Here's some water and it's cool, 'cause it's just come out of the chalk," and he grabbed the huge, splashing wooden pail, carrying it with an outstretched arm as though it were light as a feather. Then, rejoining them: "Let's go and see Norine, 'cause I have a feeling she's getting impatient and she may give us a good scolding if we dally any longer."

The night was dark and damp from the rain. They walked in single file down a pathway, their hands held high to fend off the blows of black branches, following closely behind the old man who proceeded as calmly and surely as though it were broad daylight.

At last a very faint starry light twinkled in the distance and grew larger and larger as they advanced. The rays diverged, glimmered, and became more diffuse until they disappeared altogether in the flat light of a square window. They reached a one-story cottage with just a single room. In the large fireplace, its hood cluttered with painted crockery, a fire of vine branches was crackling loudly underneath a simmering cast-iron cauldron that emitted the impetuous smell of cooked cabbage from under its dancing lid.

"Sit yourselves down," said Aunt Norine. "Are you hungry?"

"Of course."

"Well indeed!" she said, using the expression folks from this part of Brie use for everything without meaning a thing by it.

"Taste that for me, Nephew," said old Antoine. "I'm sure you'll like it. It's wine from my Graffignes harvest."

They clinked glasses and drank an acidic rosé wine, tainted with the irritating taste of dust found in wines from vats used to store oats.

"Yes, it has a slight taste of oats, that vat played a trick on me," sighed the old man, smacking his lips. "It's not like the city in the country, you don't have wine from faraway places in your silos. But, you see, it's all the same if it tastes good."

"Oh! we can't be fussy. In Paris we only drink watered-down wines in which there are few fresh grapes."

"Oh dear! Really!" Then, after a pause, he added: "I suppose, it is possible, my dear man."



"Well, indeed!" sighed Aunt Norine, clasping her hands together.

Old Antoine pulled his knife from his pocket and cut some rounds of bread.

He was a tiny old man, as thin as a beanpole, as gnarled as a vine stock, as brown as boxwood. His wrinkled face, with cheekbones streaked with pink veins, was pierced by two dull blue-green eyes on either side of a bony, short, pinched nose that twisted to the left, under which opened a wide mouth bristling with very clean, sharp teeth. Sideburns descended on either side from ears that stood out from his head. All over his face, above his lips, in the hollows of his cheeks, in his nostrils, on the nape of his neck, thick hairs grew, as stiff as bristles, salt and pepper like the thick hair on his head which he swept under his cap with his fingers. When he stood up he stooped a little, and, just like most Jutigny peasants who have worked in the peat bogs, he had horseman's legs arched in a circle. When you first met him, he seemed shriveled and sickly, but looking at the taut arch of his chest, his muscular arms, the weathered pincers that were his fingers, you could guess the strength of this grasshopper whom the heaviest of burdens could not weigh down.

And Norine, his wife, was even more robust. She, too, was over sixty. Taller than her husband, she was even thinner. She had neither belly nor bust nor bustle, but she had ax-iron hips. There was nothing feminine about her. Her yellow face, criss-crossed with wrinkles, furrowed with lines like a road map, rumpled like a piece of material all down her neck, was lit up by two strangely clear blue eyes, piercing, young, almost obscene eyes, in that face whose ruts and grooves danced at the slightest movement of her eyelids or mouth. What was more, her straight nose came to a sharp point that moved at the same time as her eyes. She was at once disturbing and dull, and the oddness of her gestures added to the disquiet of her too-bright eyes and her receding toothless mouth. She seemed to move mechanically, without joints, standing up in one mass, marching like a corporal, stretching out her arms like one of those spring-released automatons. Sitting down, she would affect poses whose absurdity would eventually become exasperating. She would adopt the dreamy attitude of ladies in paintings from the First Empire, with a faraway look, her left hand over her mouth, her elbow cradled by the palm of her right hand.

Jacques examined the couple, whose swarthy, uneven traits the feeble light of the rustic candle, as tall as a church taper, accentuated more clearly than broad daylight.

At that moment both of them had their faces in their soup and were



licking the last drops straight from the bowl. They wiped their lips with the back of their sleeves, and the old man refilled the glasses. Then, picking his teeth with his knife, he began to mutter:

"It will probably be tonight!"

"Probably, indeed," replied Norine.

"I'm counting on sleeping in the cow shed, what do you say?"

"Indeed, if she's going to calve, she'll calve, but you can't say exactly when. Well, you wouldn't believe it, my poor Lizarde's suffering so. There, listen! Do you hear her?"

And one could, in fact, hear a muffled lowing that cut through the silence of the room.

"It's just like with people, it makes you shudder!" resumed Aunt Norine wearily, and she explained that Lizarde, her best cow, was about to give birth.

"I can tell you," said Jacques, "calves sell well. It's a windfall for you."

"Indeed, indeed... it's just that she's having difficulty calving. It could start in the middle of the night and last right till the next evening; and besides, she's really inflamed. If the calf died and harm came to Lizarde, that would be nearly five hundred francs lost. But worrying won't help now, will it?"

And they began the complaints common to all country folk: "We have a hard time making ends meet, we work ourselves into the ground, and what does the land give? Hardly two-and-a-half percent. If we didn't raise cattle, what would've become of us? Today we sell wheat for next to nothing compared to the foreigners. We'll end up planting poplars," continued the old man, "that'll give just one franc a year per plant. Yes, of course it isn't like where you come from, where, with all due respect, you can earn a couple of crowns in the time it takes you to turn around!"

He broke off to reach the candle, whose wick was sputtering. "Why is it crackling like that?" he said, and he put his knife to it, cutting the sooty end between the blade and the groove of the handle.

"Look," he reprimanded, "aren't you eating?"

"Of course, of course... No, Aunt, really, I'm full," and he tried to prevent the old woman from putting a haunch of rabbit on his plate.

But she let it drop from the spoon anyway.

"I'm sure you'll eat it, just see. You haven't come here to fast, I'll bet," and after a moment's silence she sighed: "Well, indeed!" and suddenly rose and went out.

"She's going to Lizarde," said the old man, answering the astonished looks of Jacques and Louise. "If it came tonight, alas, what could she do? The herdsman would be too far away then. She could well die, the



poor beast, and he'd only have just set off. Damn and blast it!" and he shook his head, striking the table with the handle of his knife.

"Well, and you, my man, aren't you drinking? Does my wine offend you?"

Jacques could feel his head spinning in this little room filled with the heady fumes of the vine branches burning in the hearth.

"I can't breathe," he said. He rose, half opened the door, and took a deep breath of fresh air, scented with the sharp odor of damp wood mingled with the warm, ambergris smell of cow dung. "That's good," he said, and he lingered on the threshold in the darkness of the countryside, where one could hardly see two steps in front of him. It seemed as though vermiculated threads of rain were falling before his eyes, which were dilated in the darkness, but these visual disturbances only lasted for a moment, as the night was becoming lighter in the distance. A point of fire pierced the shadows, lengthened into a blade, the wide slash of light slicing Aunt Norine, who had become immense, her body bent in two as if it were hinged, her legs lying flat on the grass, her torso and head straight up in the treetops.

She was approaching, in fact, preceded by her shadow, which was stirred by a lantern.

"Well, Aunt Norine, how is Lizarde?"

"I definitely don't count on it being tonight. She'll calve later, tomorrow at noon."

They went back inside and sat at the table again.

"Here, try some," said the old man, presenting him with the terrible local cheese, withered cheese, as they call it, a sort of hard Brie the color of an old tooth, giving off the smell of cavities and latrines.

Jacques refused. "Louise is asleep on her feet," he said. "Let's go to bed."

"The fact is, my girl, we haven't heard a peep out of you. But sleep isn't so pressing that we can't have a cup of mint tea." Aunt Norine poked the fire, muttering: "Is the bottom of this pot frozen, then?" while the old man took a sachet of herbs from the larder.

"There's nothing better for the stomach," he affirmed as he selected the leaves, but the Parisians made a face when they sampled the tea, which tasted like toothpaste.

They preferred the cognac Aunt Norine brought out in a medicine bottle; and, when they insisted, old Antoine put his clogs back on, lit a lantern, and led them back to the château.



## CHAPTER II

Louise slumped onto a chair when she entered the bedroom. The over-excitement of the day had come to an end. She felt exhausted, her mind vacant, her body weary to the bone.

Jacques turned down the covers so she could get into bed, then he placed his suitcase on the table, and, sitting in front of her, sorted through his papers, waiting until the next day to tie them together and put them away in the cupboard.

Despite his long trip, he did not feel that warmth of exhaustion in his limbs at all, but he was weakening, overcome by endless mental fatigue and boundless despondency.

With his elbow on the table, he watched the candle, whose short flame could not pierce the darkness of the room, and an indefinable sense of unease haunted him. It seemed as if there were a stretch of water behind him in the darkness whose lapping breath chilled the air.

He rose, shivering, and told himself it must be the perennial dampness, the impermeable coldness of this room.

He contemplated his wife: she was stretched out on the mattress, colorless, her eyes half closed, aged ten years by the sudden relaxation of her nerves.

He went to check the doors. The bolts did not work, and, despite his efforts, the keys stubbornly refused to turn. He ended up placing a chair against the entry to prevent the door from opening, then returned to the window, stared out at the darkness and, overwhelmed with worry, got into bed.

The bed felt lumpy, and the bolster scratched with pointed barbs of straw. He settled down in the space between the bed and the wall so as not to wake his already sleeping wife, and, lying on his back, he examined the wall of the recess, which was covered in trellis wallpaper like the rest of the room, before he extinguished the candle.

He concentrated on numbing his fears by vain, mechanical occupations. He counted the diamonds on the partition wall, carefully noting the pieces of wallpaper that had been added on and whose patterns did not match. Suddenly a bizarre phenomenon occurred: the green lines of the trellis work undulated, while the unpleasant background of the paneling rippled like flowing water.

This quivering of the partition wall, immobile until that moment, became more pronounced. The wall, now liquid, oscillated, but without spreading. Soon, it rose up, burst through the ceiling, became im-



mense, then its flowing rubble was pushed aside and an enormous breach opened up into a great arch under which plunged a pathway.

Gradually, at the end of this pathway, a palace loomed up and drew nearer, gaining on the paneling, pushing it aside, reducing this fluid porch to a frame, rounded like a niche at the top but straight at the base.

And this palace which rose into the clouds with its stacked terraces, its esplanades, its lakes enclosed by bronze banks, its towers ringed in iron battlements, its domes covered by scales, its sprays of flowers on obelisks with their tips permanently capped by snow like mountain peaks, was silently torn open, then evaporated, and a gigantic room appeared, paved in porphyry, supported by vast pillars with capitals decked by bronze gourds and golden lilies.

Behind these pillars stretched side galleries with slabs of blue basalt and marble, joists of thorn and cedar woods, and coffered ceilings, gilded like reliquaries. Then, in the nave itself at the end of the palace, rounded like the glass-roofed apses of a basilica, surged other columns, whirling upward into the invisible architraves of a dome, lost, as if exhaled in an incommensurable flight of open space.

Around these columns, linked by rosy copper espaliers, a vineyard of precious stones rose up tumultuously, entangling their steel lattices, twisting their branches, whose bronze bark oozed clear saps of topaz and iridescent opaline waxes.

Everywhere climbed vine branches cut from single stones. Everywhere blazed an inferno of incombustible vine stock, an inferno fed by the mineral brands of leaves carved in their various glimmers of green, the gleaming green of emeralds, the prasine green of peridots, the dull blue-green of aquamarines, the yellowish green of zircons, the azure of beryls. Everywhere, from top to bottom, at the tips of the poles, at the feet of the stems, vines grew grapes of ruby and amethyst, bunches of grapes of garnet and almandine, chasselas grapes of chrysoprase, muscat grapes of olivine and quartz; they sent out fabulous clusters of red flashes, violet flashes, yellow flashes, and rose up in an escalation of fiery fruits, the sight of which suggested the unlikely imposture of a wine harvest ready to spit a dazzling must of flame under the press screw!

Here and there, in the confusion of foliage and creepers, vines fused vigorously, preventing themselves from falling by catching on to branches with their tendrils, branches that formed cradles, at the end of which swung symbolic garnets whose carmine bronze hiatuses caressed the tips of phallic corollas springing from the ground.

This inconceivable vegetation was illuminated from within. From all sides, obsidian and prismatic stones encrusted the pilasters, refracting



and dispersing the glimmer of the gems that, simultaneously reflected by the porphyry slabs, scattered a shower of stars onto the pavement.

Suddenly the vineyard furnace rumbled, as if angrily stirred. The palace was illuminated from base to summit, and, lifted up on a sort of bed, the king appeared, immobile in his purple robes, standing directly under his studded breastplates of hammered gold punctuated with gems, a turreted miter covering his head, his beard divided and rolled into tubes, his face the reddish gray of lava, with cheekbones protruding under his hollow eyes.

He looked down at his feet, lost in a daydream, absorbed by a dispute within his soul, weary perhaps of the futility of omnipotence and the intangible aspirations it breeds. In his moist eye, clouded over like a sky low on the horizon, you could sense the dearth of joy, the abolition of all pain, the very exhaustion of enduring hatred and ferociousness whose continued delight finally loses its edge.

At last, he lifted his head slowly and saw, standing before an old man with an egg-shaped head, crooked eyes sunk over a thick nose, and hairless cheeks as granular as soft goose flesh, a young girl bowing breathlessly and silently.

She was bareheaded, and her extremely blond hair, lightened by salts and shaded with the artifice of mauve highlights, framed her face like a hat pulled tightly over her head, covering the tips of her ears, descending like a short visor over her forehead.

Her untrammelled neck remained bare, without a single jewel or stone. From her shoulders to her heels, a closely fitted dress accentuated her figure, clinging tightly to the timorous bubbles of her breasts, sharpening their slight tips, following the line of the undulating circumflexion of her torso, lingering where it halted over her hips, crawling over the slight curve of her belly, flowing down the length of her legs, which were joined together and made clearly visible by this sheath. It was a violet-blue hyacinth dress, ocellar like a peacock's tail, dotted with eyes of sapphire pupils mounted in irises of silver satin.

She was small, just maturing, almost boyish, slightly plump, cowering, very frail. Her eyes of floral blue were slanted toward her temples by lines of lilac dye, blurred underneath to make them recede. Her painted lips sparked against her supernatural pallor, a paleness acquired through deliberate bleaching of the complexion. And the mysterious odor emanating from her, a smell of related yet discernable essences, explained that subterfuge of whiteness by the power of perfumes to decompose the pigments of the skin and permanently alter the dermis tissue.



This odor floated around her, as if surrounding her with a halo of fragrances evaporating from her flesh in breaths that were now light, now heavy.

Over a first layer of myrrh, with its sharp resinous stench, its dark fragrance with bitter almost aggressive emanations, was placed citrus oil, a green, impatient, fresh fragrance that held in check the solemn essence of Judean balsam, whose wild nuances dominated but were contained in turn, as if enslaved, by the red emanations of frankincense.

Standing thus in her sleek dress of blue flame, saturated with fragrances, her hands behind her back, her neck slightly tilted, she remained immobile, but shudders passed through her from time to time and the sapphire eyes of her gown trembled, their cloth pupils sparkling, stirred by her heaving breast.

Then the man with the clean-shaven, egg-shaped head approached her and with both hands seized her dress, which slid off, and the woman burst forth, completely naked, white, and lusterless, her bust barely formed, her nipples encircled with a gold line, her legs slender and charming, her belly crowned with a golden navel, and shimmering below were mauve highlights like her hair.

In the silence of the vaults, she walked a few paces, then knelt, and the inanimate pallor of her face increased even more.

Reflected by the porphyry of the slabs, her body appeared totally naked. She saw herself just as she was, without muslin, without veils, beneath a man's staring eyes. The alarmed respect that a short while ago had made her tremble before the silent scrutiny of a king, examining her thoroughly, investigating her with a deliberateness he savored, able, if he gestured for her dismissal, to insult this beauty that her feminine pride judged indestructible, consummate, and almost divine, was transformed into the frantic modesty, the incensed anguish of a virgin delivered up to the mutilating caresses of the master she did not know.

With the agony of an irreparable embrace, harshly treating her skin ennobled by balms, crushing her intact flesh, rupturing and violating the closed ciborium of her womb, and surging higher than the triumph of vanity, she was annihilated in a disgusting and ignoble sacrifice, without the ties of probable tomorrows, without the stammering of selfish love to delude the corporeal pain of a wound with passionate declarations of the soul. And in the posture she kept, spreading her arms and legs, she could glimpse before her, mirrored by the black paving, the golden crowns of her breasts, the golden star of her stomach, and, below her gemmed, open thighs, another golden spot.



The king's eye pierced this childlike nudity, and slowly he extends the diamond tulip of his scepter toward her, whose tip she had just hesitantly kissed.

The enormous room began to sway. Billows of mist uncoiled, like those smoke rings that, after the fireworks, blur a rocket's trajectory, its flaming parabola. And, as if lifted by this mist, the palace rose and grew even larger, flying away, becoming lost in the sky, randomly sowing its precious stones in the black furrows where high up glimmered the legendary harvest of the stars.

Then, gradually, the fog dissipated. The woman appeared leaning backward, completely white on his crimson knees, her bust arched under the red arm that, like a poker, thrust through her.

A terrible scream broke the silence, echoing under the vaults.

"Hey! What is it?"

The room was pitch black. Jacques remained stunned, his heart beating, his arm clasped around him.

He squinted in the darkness. The palace, the naked woman, the king had all disappeared.

He came to his senses and felt his wife beside him, shivering.

"What's the matter?"

"There's someone on the stairs."

Suddenly, he returned to reality. It was true, then, he was at the château of Lourps.

"Listen!"

He heard through the poorly jointed door the sound of footsteps on the stairs, first lightly brushing the steps, then staggering, and finally banging hard against the banisters.

He leapt out of bed, seizing a box of matches. He must have been asleep for a long time because the candle that had lit the room before had burned out. The candle end was lying flat, the wick drowning in its own liquid, which wept green stalactites down the brass candlestick. He took another candle from a packet he had fortunately brought with the luggage, stuck it in the holder, and grasped his cane.

His wife had gotten up too and slipped on her skirt and slippers.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"No, stay," and, moving the chair, he opened the door.

"Let's see," he said to himself, scrutinizing the floor above, "I mustn't have my line of retreat cut off, though." He hesitated. A sharp sound below him made up his mind. He went forward, gripping his cane, and at the turn in the stairs went down.



Nothing. In the candlelight, only his shadow moved, poking up at the vaulted ceiling, going head first down the stairs.

He reached the last steps, went down the entryway, pushed open the great double doors, which made a noise like thunder rumbling throughout the empty house, and entered a long room.

He was in the ruins of a dining room. The stove had been ripped out of its recess, whose rough masonry, felt-lined with dust, was crumbling into enormous spiderwebs hanging like little sacks in all the corners. Patterns of mold mottled the partition walls arborescent with cracks, and the black and white flagstones of the floor, were warped and split.

He opened yet another door and penetrated an immense furnitureless drawing room with six windows barricaded by formerly painted shutters. The dampness had caused this room's wainscoting to completely collapse. Whole panels were crumbling into dust. Fragments of flooring lay on the ground in the brown sugary sawdust of old wood. Pieces of the partition wall had been reduced to dust, falling down like fine sand at a tap of one's boot on the floor. Cracks snaked down the panels, the friezes, zigzagged up and down the doors, crossed the fireplace where a dead mirror slipped out from its frame, the gilt worn and now red, almost crumbling.

In places the burst ceiling revealed rotting shingles and boards. In others, it had kept its grain, but infiltrations had drawn improbable landscapes on it, as if with streaks of urine, where, as on a relief map, the crevices simulated the rivers and streams, and the flaking bulges the peaks of the Cordillières and Alpine ranges.

From time to time everything creaked. Jacques would turn around abruptly, shedding light on the side whence the noise had come, but the dark corners of the room he explored hid no one, and on all sides the doors he half opened revealed rows of silent, mildewed rooms stinking like airless tombs, slowly crumbling to dust.

He retraced his steps, waiting until daylight to inspect each room in detail, intending to block them off if at all possible. He passed again through the rooms he had covered, turning around at every step, because the walls were settling and new creaks could be heard.

His nerves had been put on edge by the tension of this unsuccessful search. The awful solitude of these rooms seized hold of him and, with it, an unexpected and ghastly fear, not of a known, certain danger, for he felt this trance would vanish if he found a man crouching in a corner, but a fear of the unknown, nervous terror exacerbated by the disturbing sounds in this black desert.

He tried without success to reason with himself and laugh at his



weakness in imagining the château was haunted. He went straight for the most impossible, the most fantastic, the wildest ideas just to reassure himself, revealing peremptorily the inanity of his fears. Whatever he did, his distress increased. Yet he managed to repress it for a moment with an imagined vision of immediate peril, of a sudden physical fight. He entered the corridor, searched it feverishly, swearing with anger, wanting at all costs to discover a real danger in order to escape this fear.

Disheartened, he decided to go back up, when a thundering sound suddenly rang out over his head on the stairs. He went forward. In the air, something enormous filled the stairwell, fanning it.

As if shaken by a gust of wind, the candle's flame was flattened, shooting acrid jets of smoke and shedding hardly any light. He had just enough time to step back, brace himself on one leg, and lash out hard with his pine cane on all sides at the whirling mass that subsided with a shrill scream.

Another scream replied; it was Louise who had appeared, leaning fearfully on the banisters.

"Look out! Look out!"

In the roaring blast of a forge, two wheels of flaming phosphorus rushed at him.

Then he stepped back and lunged, stabbing as if he held a sword into the two holes of fire, cutting as if he held a saber, hitting the howling mass with all his might as it struggled, bumping the walls, shaking the banisters.

He stopped, exhausted and stunned, and looked at the body of an enormous screech owl whose clenched talons were scratching the bloody paneling.

"Phew!" he said, wiping his red-streaked hands, "It was lucky I had my cane," and he went upstairs to his wife, even whiter than a sheet, who had fallen into a chair. He splashed her face with water, helped her back into bed, explaining to her, and not very well, with a halting voice, that the château was deserted, that the sound of steps in the distance had been the sound of wings brushing the walls of the staircase, knocking the balustrade, and scratching the vault. She smiled sweetly and stretched out exhausted on the pallet.

He no longer felt the need for sleep. Although his legs were trembling and his fingers were so numb and limp that he could not clench his fist, he preferred to remain dressed and sit in a chair to await the dawn.

Then he experienced an inexplicable hubbub of reflections, a whole



string of ideas, swift and diverse beads that reeled off, hailing in his brain without any theme or coherence.

He thought first of his luck in piercing that beast's head and not letting it devour his eyes. And that naked woman glazed with gold, now effaced by awakening, like a drawing under an eraser. How had such a dream occurred? Ah! Daylight was so slow in coming! How badly had this arrival in the country begun! Of course, he would have difficulties settling in, for at first sight this isolated château, far from any village, presented no opportunities! What an appalling situation he was in, all the same, and how would he ever earn his keep once he returned to Paris? And Aunt Norine had such peculiar eyes! But how could he explain his strange dream? If only that friend he had previously helped had paid him back a little money, but no, nothing! Poor woman! he said to himself, looking at the pallid Louise in bed, her eyes shut, her lips weary.

Then, standing up, he looked out the window. Day was finally dawning, but so crepuscular and pale! To deflect the incoherence of these mournful ideas, he forced himself to tidy his papers and tie them into bundles. He finally dozed off, his head on the table, and woke up with a start.

The sun was high in the sky. His watch said five o'clock. He sighed with relief, took his hat, and tiptoed downstairs, so as not to wake his wife.

### CHAPTER III

He stood dazzled on the doorstep. Before him stretched a vast courtyard teeming with dandelions poking up above green leaves that crawled along loose stones ravaged with dried cilia. On his right was a well surmounted by a sort of sheet-metal pagoda topped with an iron crescent set on a ball. Further on were rows of peach trees scattered along a wall and, above them, the church whose dull gray silhouette disappeared in places beneath a glossy netting of ivy and in others beneath the marigold velvet of a layer of moss.

Behind him to the left lay the château, immense, comprising a one-story wing with eight windows, a square tower containing the staircase, then, at right angles to this, another wing, with the lower casements carved into pointed arches.

And this edifice, broken down by age, shaken by rains, eroded by north winds, held up a facade illuminated by triple-crossed casements broken up by watery colored windowpanes, and topped by a brown



tilled roof, marbled with white bird droppings, in a pale fluid daylight that honeyed its tanned, stony skin.

Jacques forgot the funereal impression experienced the night before. Sunshine disguised the old age of the château, whose imposing wrinkles smiled, as if filled with golden light, in the walls stained by rusty iron Ys equally spaced on the coarse, roughcast epidermis.

The inanimate silence, the desertion that had gripped his heart during the night, no longer existed. The extinct life of the place, denounced by the uncurtained windows opening onto bare corridors and empty rooms, seemed ready to be reborn. It would certainly suffice to air the rooms, to awaken with shouts the slumbering resonances of the halls, for the château to relive its existence, which had been held in check for years.

Then, as the young man was examining it, inspecting its facade, discovering that the upper floor and the roof dated from the last century while the foundations went back to the Middle Ages, a loud noise made him spin around, and, looking up, he noticed that the round tower, glimpsed the night before, did not join the château at all, as he had thought. It was isolated in a farmyard and served as a pigeon loft. He approached, climbed a crumbling staircase, pulled the bolt across, and poked his head inside the door.

An immense flurry of wings frantically colliding high up in the tower stunned him, and a sharp odor of ammonia stung the mucous membranes in his nose and the rims of his eyes. He stepped back, just glimpsing through his tears the interior of the pigeon loft, honeycombed like the inside of a beehive and equipped with a pivoting ladder, and, withdrawing, he saw a snow of white feathers whirling in a shaft of sunlight, which entered through an open skylight at the top of the tower and extended to the ground.

The birds that had fled the dovecote had taken refuge on the château and were all flapping and stretching their wings, strutting about preening themselves, moving in the sunshine, their backs metallicly glinting, their quicksilver breasts shining with a reseda-and-pink luster, their satin throats, quivering, aflame with cream, gold, and ashen tints.

Then some of the pigeons flew off in a circle around the high chimneys and the garland suddenly broke up and they settled back onto the tower, giving the roof a cooing feather bonnet.

Jacques turned his back to the château and, before him, at the far end of the courtyard, he saw an overgrown garden with trees rising wildly into the sky.

Approaching it, he could make out almond-shaped, ancient flower-



beds, but their outlines had hardly survived. Of the boxwood seedlings that used to border them, some were dead and others had grown up like trees and seemed, as in a cemetery, to be shading graves lost in the grass. Here and there, in these ancient ovals invaded by nettles and brambles, appeared old rosebushes that had reverted to their wild state, sowing a green tangle with the reddish olives of nascent rose hips. Further on, potatoes from who knows where were sprouting, as well as poppies and clover that had doubtless blown in from the fields. Finally, in another flowerbed, clusters of absinthe whipped tufts of wild grass with an odorous hail of golden disks.

Jacques walked toward a lawn, but the grass was dead, smothered by moss. His feet sank in and got snagged on hidden roots and stumps that had been buried there for years. He tried to follow a path whose outline was still visible, but the trees, left to themselves, had barricaded it with their branches.

This garden must have been previously planted with fruit and blossom trees. Hazel trees as broad as oaks and sumacs with little blackish-purple berries, as sticky as black currants, tangled their arms among the crippled heads of old apple trees with split trunks, their wounds dressed with lichen. Bladdernut bushes waved their pods of gummed taffeta beneath bizarre trees whose origin or name Jacques did not know, trees dotted with gray balls, a type of soft nutmeg, whence came little clawed fingers, moist and pink.

Amid all this jostling vegetation, these rockets of verdure bursting out at will in all directions, overflowed conifers, pines, firs, spruces, and cypresses. Some, gigantic, in the shape of pagodas, swinging the brown bells of their cones, others beaded with little red tassels, still others granitelike with ribbed, bluish buds, raised their masts bristling with needles, and their enormous trunks, covered with gashes, flowed with tears of white resin like drops of melted sugar.

Jacques proceeded slowly, pushing aside shrubs and stepping over clumps. Soon the path became impassable. Low pine branches barred the way, twisting along the ground, killing all the vegetation underneath, sowing the soil with thousands of brown needles, while old vine shoots leapt from one side of the path to the other in midair and, clinging to the trunks of the pines, climbed around them, snaking up to the treetops and waving triumphant bunches of green grapes high in the sky.

He looked in amazement at this chaos of plants and trees. For how long had this garden been neglected? Here and there, great oaks soaring up at an angle crossed each other and, dead from old age, served as sup-



ports for the parasites that draped between them, branching out into fine networks held together by loops, hanging like nets of green chains filled with a rustic catch of foliage. Quinces and pear trees were sprouting leaves further on, but their waning sap was too lifeless to bear fruit. All the cultivated flowers in the beds were dead. There was an inextricable tangle of roots and creepers, an invasion of couch grass, an assault of garden vegetables whose seeds had been carried there by the wind, inedible legumes with woolly pulp and flesh, deformed and soured by their solitude in a fallow soil.

A silence, interrupted at times by the cries of frightened birds and the leaps of disturbed, fleeing rabbits, hung over this natural disorder, this *Jacquerie* of farmed species and wild weeds, mistress at last of a soil fertilized by the carnage of feudal values and princely flowers.

With a melancholy heart, he reflected on this cynical banditry of nature, copied by man in such a servile manner.

What a pretty thing are throngs of vegetables and people! he thought. He shook his head, then leapt over the low branches and opened the fan of shrubbery, which folded back behind him, blocking the path again. He finally came to an iron gate. Even though it appeared otherwise, this garden was not very large; the main grounds did not begin until the other side of the gate. A grand pathway, disfigured by felling, led down through the woods toward a simple, openwork oak door that linked up with the road to Longueville.

He pushed the gate. It shook but did not open. Tangled, dried-up mosses obstructed it at the base, while climbing plants wound round the bars where convolvulus bells perfumed the air with the smell of almonds. He turned back again, stirring up the thickets of an old arbor whose dead branches broke, leaping up like shards of glass, and he finally reached an opening in the wall, went through, and found himself on the other side of the gate.

There he noticed traces of ancient moats, some of which still bore remnants of gargoyles, their mouths gagged by ivy, their necks strangled with strings of morning glory and spiraling thongs of wild vines, and he came across the edge of a chestnut and oak tree woods. He began to walk down a path, but soon the route became impenetrable. Ivy was devouring the woods, covering the ground, filling up the hollows, leveling the mounds, suffocating the trees, stretching upward like a sieve with large holes and downward like a sunken field of blackish green, mottled here and there by snake grass with bright vermillion tufts.

A sensation of crepuscule and cold emanated from these thick vaults through a sifted daylight, devoid of gold and letting only a violet light



filter through onto the darkened mass of the ground. A strong, pungent smell, something like the scent of boar's urine, rose from the earth rotten with leaves, overturned by moles, ravaged by roots, soddened by water.

The feeling of dampness that had chilled him the day before, when he had first set foot in the château, gripped him again. He had to stop, for he was stumbling into holes, becoming entangled in traps of ivy.

He turned back, followed the edge of the woods, and went along the back of the château, which he had not yet seen. This side, deprived of sunlight, was dismal. Seen from the front, the château remained imposing, despite its appearance of poverty and the dilapidation of its walls. In broad daylight, its old age even seemed to come to life, becoming almost welcoming and tender. Seen from behind, it appeared mournful and outmoded, sordid and somber.

The roofs, so gay in the sun, with their suntanned coloring pitted with the guano of white flies, looked in this shadow like the forgotten bottom of a cage, revoltingly dirty. Beneath them everything was shaky. The gutters, laden with leaves, stuffed with tiles, had burst and flooded the roughcasting excoriated by the north wind with coffee-colored liquid. The clips that held the downpipes were broken, and some of the pipes hung, curling up, waving their empty sleeves in the wind. The windows had fallen apart, the fractured shutters had been nailed down hastily and bandaged with planks of wood, and the persiennes swayed to and fro, stripped of slats and unbalanced by lost hinges.

Below, six broken steps beneath a recess full of tousled weeds led to a condemned door, the cracks in its planks connected and filled in by the blackness of the closed entryway situated behind.

All in all the infirmities of hideous old age, the catarrhal expiation of water, the rosacea on the plasterwork, the sticky matter in the windows, the fistulas on the stonework, the leprosy on the brickwork, a whole hemorrhaging of filth had flung itself at this hovel, which was dying off alone in a state of neglect in the hidden solitude of the woods.

The blinding light, the shower of sunlight that had done away with the great wind of anguish that had whipped him the day before, had come to an end. An indescribable sadness wrung his heart again. The memory of the dreadful night he had spent in this ruin was revived, along with the shame, now that it was light and the lucidity of daytime reverberated in his mind, of having been so deeply disturbed by that stay in the shadows.

And yet he still felt overcome by a remarkable uneasiness. This isolation, this dank wood, this light that settled purplish and cloudy under



the vaults, acted like the darkness and coldness of the château whose sickly, dull melancholy they recalled.

He simultaneously shuddered and became exasperated by the ridiculous memory of his struggle on the stairs with the screech owl. He tried to analyze himself, admitted that he was currently in an exorbitant mental state, at the mercy of external impressions, tormented by his raw nerves, which were rebelling against his reason, although their miserable weaknesses had nevertheless dissipated since dawn.

This inner struggle overwhelmed him. He hastened to escape it, hoping that his ill ease would disappear in a less somber place.

He strode toward a road bathed in sunbeams, visible to him at the other end of the château and the copse, and his expectations seemed to be fulfilled as soon as he reached this path separating the outbuildings of the château from the parish estates. He felt relieved. The grassy embankment was dry. He sat down and glanced around at the towers, the orchards, the woods, and forgot his troubles, suddenly imbued with the numbing warmth of this landscape whose underground exhalations melted the ice in his soul.

The moment did not last long. The progression of his thoughts, retracing the frightening road he had been down the night before, began again, but this time in a more ordered and precise manner. Now that he had come out of the woods whose atmosphere aroused, by returning to a place that was similar in his imagination, the same sensations as those he had experienced in the château that night, he blushed at his apprehension and became indignant at his unease and panic.

That vague feeling of shame he had experienced when he had entered that cluster of trees a little while ago and thought about the night's events recurred. Now, while breathing deeply in the sunlight, he no longer allowed, as he had under the icy arches of ivy, the involuntary shudders that had run up his spine in the château. He tried to turn his thoughts away from this path to think about things far from the countryside, far from the château of Lourps. All the same, he returned to the present, leaping over the childhood years he evoked, over the image of Paris he strived to suggest, even over his financial troubles that he called to his aid.

He shrugged his shoulders, realizing that his thoughts would not wander, that they could not, despite all his efforts, distance themselves from that imperious night. So he forced himself at least to deflect his agony, to lead his thoughts and fix them on the only events during the night whose recurrence was not odious to him. He closed his eyes to better isolate himself and think again about that astonishing dream he had seen unfold while he was dozing.



He tried to explain it to himself. Where, in which century, in which latitude, in which vicinity could that immense palace be, with its domes shooting up into the clouds, its phallic columns, its pillars emerging from a floor of hard, reflective water?

He wandered among ancient words and old legends, stumbled in the mists of history, imagining vague Bactrias, hypothetical Cappadoces, dim Suzes, impossible peoples over whom this red monarch, with his golden tiara grained with gems, could reign.

Gradually, however, a glimmer came to him, and the memories of holy books drifting through his mind combined and converged on the one in which Assuerus, heeding his declining virility, rises up before the niece of Mardochea, the august procurer, the fortunate medium of the Jewish god.

The characters were illuminated by this glimmer, delineated by his memories of the Bible, and became recognizable. The silent king seeking a mate, Esther steeped in spices, bathed in oils, and rolled in powders for twelve months, then led naked, by the eunuch Egea, to the bed that would redeem the people.

And the symbol was also disclosed by the great Vine, sister, through Noah, of carnal Nudity, Esther's sister, the Vine combining with the woman's charms in order to save Israel, extracting a promise in the king's lascivious orgy.

This explanation seems correct, he thought, but why had Esther's image assailed him, when no single circumstance had been able to revive these long-faded memories?

Not as faded as that, he continued, since, if not the text, at least the subject of the Book of Esther now comes back to me clearly.

Despite everything, he persisted in seeking the source of his dream in the more or less logical links between his ideas. But he had not read any books with passages that might stimulate a possible reminder of Esther. He had not seen any engraving, any picture whose subject could induce him to think about her. He had to believe, therefore, that this reading of the Bible had been smoldering for years in one of the corners of his memory so that, once the incubation period was over, Esther would burst forth like a mysterious flower, into the land of dreams.

All this is most strange, he concluded. And he remained pensive, for the unfathomable enigma of the Dream haunted him. Were these visions, as man had believed for so long, the soul's journeying outside the body, a flight from the world, the wanderings of the mind escaping from its carnal hostelry and roaming at will in occult regions, in a past or future limbo?



In their impenetrable insanity, did dreams have any meaning? Was Artemidorus right when he upheld that the Dream is the soul's fantasy, signifying good or evil, and did old Porphyry see the truth when he attributed dream elements to a spirit warning us, while we sleep, of the pitfalls of waking life?

Do they predict the future and summon up events to come? If this were the case, wasn't the secular muddling of oneiromancers and necromancers absolutely insane?

Or was it, according to modern scientific theory, simply the metamorphosis of real-life impressions, simply the deformation of previously acquired perceptions?

But, in that case, how could those flights into the unimagined places of the previous day's state be explained by memories?

Was there, on the other hand, a necessary link between ideas so subtle that its thread escaped analysis, an underground thread working in the darkness of his soul, carrying a spark, suddenly illuminating its forgotten cellars, linking together storerooms that had lain empty since childhood? Did the phenomena of a dream have such a faithful relationship to the phenomena of real life that man was not permitted to perceive it? Was it quite simply an unconscious and sudden vibration of encephalic fibers, a residue of spiritual activity, a survival of embryonic thoughts in the brain, larval images that had passed through, the turbid sieve of a half-stopped machine, operating empty while one slept?

Must one finally acknowledge supernatural causes, believe in the designs of Providence inciting the incoherent whirls of dreams, and simultaneously accept the inevitable visits of incubi and succubi, all the remote hypotheses of demonists, or was it more suitable to stop at the material causes, to relate the soul's wild ramblings exclusively to external levers, stomach troubles, or involuntary body movements?

In this case, science's pretensions to explain everything could not be doubted, to convince itself, for example, that nightmares are produced by episodes of indigestion, Siberian dreams by the cooling of the body when the bedclothes come untucked and leave it bare, suffocation by the weight of a blanket. One must also recognize that the frequent illusion of the sleeper in bed who starts, imagining himself tumbling down some steps or falling off the precipice of a high tower, is due, as Wundt affirms, to an unconscious extension of the foot.

But, even if one acknowledges the influence of external stimuli, of a slight noise, a light touch, a smell lingering in the bedroom, even if one accepts the fact of congestion or acceleration and deceleration of the heart, even if one consents to believe, as Radstock does, that moon-



beams determine whether the sleeper shall experience mystic visions, none of this would explain the mystery of the psyche freed and leaving swiftly for magical landscapes, under new skies, across reawakened towns, future palaces, and regions yet to be, certainly none of this could explain the fanciful presence of Esther at the château of Lourps!

It is enough to confuse anyone. Yet it is certain, he said to himself, that, whatever their opinion, the experts are faltering.

These futile reflections had at least diverted the stream of his thoughts, which were moving away from their original source. The sun began to warm his back and, without his knowledge, was pouring a fluid of joy into his veins. He got up and looked at the landscape behind him, stretching out at his feet as far as the eye could see, totally flat for many leagues, a landscape quartered by two main roads in a long white cross between whose arms lay, whipped by the wind, a haze shaded green by rye, violet by alfalfa, pink by sainfoin and clover.

He felt the need to walk, but he did not want to go back the same way. He walked along rising walls, turning corners, proceeding slowly, hunching his shoulders, listening to the slow humming in the air, inhaling the earthy fragrance of the wind that swept the road. He was walking now among apple trees and vines. Suddenly, he noticed a half-open door and found himself in an orchard at the far end of which appeared the snuffer-shaped tower of the pigeon loft.

"Hey, there!" uttered a voice to his left, as the rumbling of a wheelbarrow came upon him.

It was Aunt Norine.

"Well, well! How goes it, this morning, nephew?"

And she set the handles of the wheelbarrow down on the ground.

"Very well, thank you . . . and where is Uncle Antoine?"

"He'd be working in the yard at this hour, he's doing the copper."

"What is he doing?"

"The copper."

At Jacques's vacant look, Aunt Norine burst out laughing: "Of course, he's cleaning the dirty cauldron with some sandstone."

Jacques finally understood: "Ah, cleaning the cauldron."

"Yes, doing the copper, that's what the cauldron's made of."

"And what about the pregnant cow?"

"Don't talk to me about that, my lad. Poor creature, when I think how it torments her, how it must pull, but she's not pushing anymore. I'm going 'cause, you see, I have to see the herdsman about her."

And she went on her way, standing tall in her strawhat, her vest making her appear flat chested, her back jolting like a marching sol-



dier's, her elbows trembling from the effort of supporting the wheelbarrow she pushed in front of her.

"See you later. Look, over there," and with a nod of her head she pointed to a little path to follow at the end of which he indeed glimpsed Uncle Antoine in a pool of sunlight, scouring a copper cauldron.

He was scraping his fingers in his effort.

"I've just seen Louise," said old Antoine, putting his cauldron down.

"Is she up, then?"

"Yes, it seems as if she didn't have a good night," and he added that, the night before last, he and his wife had had to slaughter two screech owls so they could take possession of their own bedroom.

"Oh, there's no danger here. There aren't any thieves," he continued after a pause, as if he were talking to himself or repeating the reply to one of the questions Louise had doubtless asked him. "Only, for all that, you mustn't take your constitutional near the woods at night, you know."

"Ah! Why's that?"

"Well, because there are poachers there who don't like being disturbed."

"But, as a steward I'd say you must surely go after them."

"Without a doubt, but, in this game, my lad, you see, it wouldn't do much good. Isn't it better that they eat the rabbit or sell it to me for a good price?" And the old man winked. "But, let's see, sit down, you've got time, your wife will be far away now. She's gone to Savin with my sister, you know, Armandine, my blood sister, who's given her a lift in her carriage to buy some provisions. She won't be back till at least one."

Jacques sat down next to old Antoine on a tree trunk.

He could now recognize the little house where he had dined the evening before. By day, it seemed to him even more shabby and low roofed, with its thinning thatch, its barndoor, the ramshackle sheds leaning against it, full of bundles of fodder, barrels, and spades.

He could smell the cow shed, heated by the sheet of the steel sky, which had dried overnight and become flat and cloudless, a blue that was almost harsh. Jacques's attention wandered from the old man who was speaking to him in patois, his face gilded by the reflections from his cauldron.

He mechanically rolled the hollow stem of a dandelion between his fingers, its down falling along his trousers, which he flicked away. Then he looked at the speckled black hens, pecking with the tips of their beaks, furiously scratching the soil with their star-shaped feet and then sharply stabbing at it again. Here and there, chicks dashed past like



little rats as soon as the cock approached, suddenly sticking out his neck and shaking his feathers as if to fly away.

He wound up dozing off, intoxicated by the smell of cow chips and manure. The crowing of the cock drew him from his torpor. He opened one eye. Old Antoine was now raking the barn. Jacques yawned, then a band of ducks waddling toward him captured his interest. When they were half-a-dozen paces from him, they stopped short and thrust the lemon-colored pincers that were their beaks against a piece of old wood, chipping at it and swallowing the wood lice, which, uncovered, were trying to scurry away.

"Ah! You're sleepy," said Uncle Antoine. "Come with me to Graf-figne Hill, that will wake you up."

But the young man refused. He preferred to go and take a look at the rooms in the château.

He was, in fact, curious to search the interior of this edifice and to ascertain, before nightfall, if it would not be possible to settle into a more secure and less dismal room.

He felt exhausted by his railway journey, by his long walk, by his sleepless night. He felt as if there were fire in the palms of his hands, and hot flushes passed over his temples. On the way, he reasoned with himself. The fact that he was agitated by this vague and tyrannical fear, beside himself with this preoccupation with safety and this need to be constantly on the lookout, haunted by the inexplicable dream that obsessed him all the more now, was all simply due to his nervous, weary state, the unbalance that began with his worries and his cares and had been clinched by a sudden change of surroundings.

A good night will free me from this uneasiness. In the meantime, let's examine the rooms downstairs, he thought, entering the château vestibule.

He entered a dark kitchen, dimly lit like a dungeon in the theater, with its arched vault, its low, rounded doorways, its hooded fireplace, its rough-tiled floor. Then he came upon a series of sinister block-houses, with floors of hard-packed earth, hollowed by erosion, the marly soil pierced with pools of black water. He turned back, returning to the rooms he had already crossed the night before. They seemed to him even more dilapidated, even more eroded by salts of nitric acid, even more filthy in the sunlight that bathed the oozing, crumbling wall-paper. Finally, he started on the other wing and wandered through its deserted rooms. They were all alike, immense, overhung by high ceilings, with badly laid parquet floors revealing rotten backing strips, stinking of fungus, reeking of rats. They are uninhabitable, he said to



himself. He finally ended up in a very large bedroom with two wide windows, decorated with two fireplaces, one in each corner.

This room was superb, with gray paneling brightened by angelica, piers over the doors, and two large windows with their shutters closed.

"Well, this is more like it! Let's have a closer look."

He freed the window catches, breaking his nails on the shutters, which gave way, creaking. He was left disappointed. This room retained a healthy aspect in the dark, but in the daylight it was revoltingly old and weary. Its inverted arched ceiling was sagging. Raised blocks of parquet flooring stood end to end. Wall cupboards with torn papered frames laid bare lining material speckled with a laudanum of rust. Coffee-colored sweat flowed without respite onto the veined skirting boards, and enormous rosaries rippled along the friezes, the rosary strings simulated by the cracks, their beads represented by the pale blisters of mold.

He approached the alcove, noticed that it was furrowed by worms and eaten by termites. One push and everything would crumble. What a ruin! This room was probably the most run-down of them all. A small door situated near the alcove caught his attention. It opened onto a closet lined with shelves. A strange odor emanated from this room, the smell of warm dust with an extremely faint scent of ether in the background.

The stench almost moved him, for it aroused in him pampering visions of a disheveled past. It seemed the last emanation of forgotten smells from the eighteenth century, those scents based on bergamot and lemon, which, when they grow stale, smell of ether. The spirit of bottles unstoppered in the past had returned to wish a plaintive welcome to the visitor of these dead rooms.

It was probably the closet of the marquise of Saint Phal, whom old Antoine had often spoken about during his visits to Paris.

And this bedroom was doubtless hers, too. Country tradition represented the marquise as slender, dainty, languid, almost doleful. All these details recalled each other, grouped together, then melted into the dusty image of a young woman daydreaming in an easy chair, warming her feet and her back between the two fireplaces by the reddened hearths.

How long ago all of that was! The cold charms of the woman were sleeping in the graveyard nearby, behind the church. The room was dead too, and stank of the grave. He seemed to be violating the sepulcher of a bygone age, a milieu that was dead and gone. He closed the shutters and the doors, returned to the stairs, went up to the first floor to his bedroom, turned, and began to explore the right wing.



His astonishment increased. There was a veritable extravagance of doors. Five or six opened onto a long corridor. He pushed one door and three more appeared, closed in a dark room. And all of them opened onto storage closets, obscure nooks joined together by other doors and generally ending up in a large, light room, overlooking the grounds, a room in tatters, full of debris and scraps.

What neglect! he thought. He came out again and went to take a look at the other wing. Without much hope, he entered new doors, other rooms, lost his way in this labyrinth, returning to his starting point, going round in circles, losing his head in this inextricable jumble of closets and rooms.

He made a considerable din all by himself. His steps resounded in the emptiness like the boots of battalions on the march. Oxidized hinges squeaked at the slightest jolt and the shaken windows rattled.

He was beginning to feel exasperated by all this noise when he ended up at the far end of the château in an immense room fitted with shelves and cupboards. He pushed back the shutters of one of the casements, and in a stream of light, the appearance of the place became apparent.

It was the old library of the château. The bookcases had lost their panes of glass, shards of which crunched under his shoes whenever he moved. The ceiling bulged in places, flaking, raining a thin layer of plaster on the glass dust, which sanded the floor with little glimmers. Behind him the young man noticed an elder tree growing through a broken window into the room, brushing with its branches the wens and blisters the humidity had raised on the walls. Above and below, everything was rotting, crumbling, shelling, and decaying, while in the air enormous harvest spiders with white crosses stamped on their backs swung, dancing silent chaconnes with one another, on the end of their threads.

As in the marquise's bedroom, he became pensive. This library, so dilapidated now, must have once been alive. What had become of all the marbled calfskin, all the coarse-grained morocco leather, gendarme blue or burgundy red, chocolate brown or myrtle, Levant hides emblazoned on the flat side and gilded along the edge? What had become of the indispensable globe, with its puffed-up angel's heads, blowing with swollen cheeks at each of the cardinal points? What had become of the amaranth and rosewood table, the furniture ornamented with ferrules of molded gold and twisted feet?

Just like the meadows, just like the woods carved up now by the peasants, they had doubtless disappeared in the squalls of pillaging and winds!



"I've had enough," he sighed, closing the door. "My wife is right. In this immense château, one place alone is still alive."

He found his way back to the corridor that led the way out and, once back on the stairs, reached the attic. He lacked the spirit to walk through it. He was content to half open the door, saw the sky looming through the unblocked holes between the tiles, and came back down, imagining that, by comparison, the room Louise had chosen was charming.

But this impression hardly lasted. It vanished as soon as he approached the window. The casement looked out onto the back of the château by the dark woods, devoured by ivy. He felt a shiver run down his spine and he proceeded toward the courtyard.

He roamed around the château again, trying to find out whether he could secure himself at nightfall against marauders and beasts. The doors refused to open without a kick or a shove, but most had lost their keys or were closed with bolts that no longer had strikes. He inspected his surroundings. The grounds were not even closed off from the woods. No wall, no hedge. Anybody could come in.

It really is far too primitive, he thought. Then, overcome with weariness, he went into the garden, stretched out on the lawn, and, once more, the dashing brightness of the sky shook his soul, for his thoughts turned over and over, like all those whose body is weary, dependent on purely external impressions. He breathed a sigh of contentment and fell asleep, his back snug against the quilted moss, his face gradually cooled by the resinous fanning of the pine trees.

#### CHAPTER IV

The next day at dawn, at around four o'clock, a knock shook one of the bedroom doors. Waking with a start, the alarmed Jacques and Louise saw Uncle Antoine standing before them, bringing in with him the warm smell of manure.

"Nephew," he said, "it's coming!"

"What's coming?"

"The calf, of course! I told you it would be soon! Norine has run to the village to get the herdsman. I can't be everywhere at once and I'm afraid she'll calve before they get up the hill."

"But," said Jacques, slipping on his trousers, "I'm no midwife and I don't know how to treat a cow's labor. So I really don't see how I can be of use."

"You can, indeed. While your wife lights the fire and warms the wine for Lizarde, you can give me a hand while we wait for Norine and François to get here."



Louise made a sign to her husband. Then she said: "I'll follow you. Go ahead so I can get dressed."

On the way, Jacques could not help laughing, contemplating his uncle's face, pockmarked with black spots.

"Ah, what's on your face?"

The old man spat on his hand, rubbed it on his cheeks, and examined it.

"Oh, it's fly specks! I spent the night in the cow shed and, it's true, nephew, where there's cattle, there's flies!"

And he hurried his steps, bending his short legs, grumbling to himself, rubbing his fingers on the bristles on his chin, then scratching his head under his hat, which was sticky with grime.

When he opened the door to the cow shed, Jacques swayed. A caustic, alkaline, sweltering heat mixed with thousands of flies pierced his eyes with needles and bored his ears with shrill buzzing. The cow shed, dimly lit by a skylight, was too small to hold its four cows, packed together on bedding slimy with excremental pies.

"My poor Lizarde! My poor creature!" moaned old Antoine, approaching the one that was lowing quietly and looking at him with her great, vacant eyes, her head turned toward him. And, pushing the others aside with his feet, he stroked Lizarde, and spoke to her softly as though she were a child, calling her loving names, "my little child, Daddy's little girl," encouraging her to bear the "nasty pain," maintaining that if she pushed hard it wouldn't last a moment, after which she would return to her normal size.

Rubbing his head, he said to Jacques:

"It's just that she's pushing the calf out more and more! Damn it! What the hell is Norine up to? In the meantime I'll go and prepare some tow, anyway, to pull the calf out with." And, while he was twisting his skeins as Lizarde continued to low, he boasted, no doubt to comfort her, of the soundness of his affections and the quality of her udders.

"Supposing you milked her, Nephew, well, she would hardly give you any milk! She only lets herself go with Norine. She gives it all for her. Ah! Loving and loving just a bit are hardly the same thing. And Lizarde is like everyone else, she loves those who look after her!

"And the others, they're all the same, they're just like her, too!" and he pointed to the three cows, calling out their names. "Si Belle, Barrée, Noire," who looked indifferently at their companion, who was now lowing, her head raised toward the skylight.

"I'll lubricate the birth anyway, that'll ease her," muttered old Antoine to himself, pouring some oil into a bowl, then lifting up the tail with one hand, he coated the creature's inflamed genitals with the other.



"There you are!" he said, turning toward Louise, who was just arriving. "Warm some wine quickly and prepare some bran and water in the pail."

"What's the matter with you?" He grumbled between his teeth seeing his niece grow pale, "Confounded females! They're just not built to help a man!" Louise went pale, for the terrible cow shed smell turned her stomach. Jacques was at the door supporting her when shouts announced the arrival of Aunt Norine.

"Well, well," cried Uncle, paying no more attention to his niece's faintness. "Well, well, you took your time! If you didn't stay two hours, you stayed one. What the hell were you doing on the way?"

"I came as quick as I could," said the herdsman, lifting his cap when he saw Jacques.

And he entered the cow shed, deafened by Norine's screeching. She was kissing her cow on the chops while the animal's lowing became more hurried and prolonged.

"I think this is it," said the herdsman, taking off his sleeved vest and pushing his cap back on his head.

The pointed shapes of hooves were becoming apparent in the diaphanous balloon coming out of the cow. The herdsman burst the membrane and the hooves appeared, not totally raw, but bleeding like those badly cooked sheep's trotters served in the cheapest restaurants. And Jacques, remaining on the threshold, saw the two men enter the cow's hindquarters with their arms bare and tow wrapped around their hands, and pull, cursing, while the animal shook the cow shed with her bellowing.

"Damn it! Stay put. No, no, to the right. It's just that the guy weighs a ton!" And suddenly an enormous, sticky mass tumbled out with splashes of lochia and phlegm onto a prepared heap of straw, while the red, open gash under the cow's rump closed up again, as if moved by a spring.

"Well! God damn it! Look at him! Ah, the blessed little bastard!" muttered Uncle Antoine, rubbing down the calf, which was trying to get up on its front legs and was butting everything with its head.

Norine came in with a steaming bucket of wine.

"You didn't put any oats in it, did you?" asked the herdsman.

"No, my lad."

"Good, because, you see, that inflames. Hempseed if you have it, but no oats." And they put the pail near the animal, who had stood up again, her vulva bleeding stalactites of pink mucus.

Lizarde lapped up the wine in one go. Then Norine knelt down and



began to milk her. She looked as if she were ringing bells, and the teats spurted frothy yellow sludge under her fingers, moistened with a drop of milk.

"Here you are, drink this," she said to the cow, which swallowed the soup from her udders with two licks.

"What a beautiful calf, what a beautiful calf," said the herdsman, drying his fingers with a wisp of straw. Aunt Norine remained ecstatic, her hands clasped over her stomach.

The cow began to low again.

"When are you going to stop bawling like that," shouted out Norine. "Give the old cow one on the muzzle, the beast!" reprimanded Uncle Antoine, wiping his forehead with the back of his sleeve.

There was no "little child" or "daddy's little girl," no more loving names, no more encouragement to calve well. The birth had been an easy one and the calf had turned out viable. Their tenderness came to an end at the same time as their pecuniary anxieties.

Now it was just a matter of resting and having a drink.

They returned to the shack, and Norine took the potion bottle of brandy out of the cupboard. Everybody clinked glasses and emptied them in one gulp.

Then Antoine began to chat with the herdsman about celebrated deliveries of certain cows in the region.

"Tell my nephew, François, how many men were needed to deliver Constant's cow."

"Well, sir," said the herdsman, turning to Jacques, "we needed eight, courageous men at that! Ah! I'll say, I worked up a sweat that day! Yes, dear sir, I had to, if you'll forgive the expression, stick my arm up the beast's ass to roll the calf round and make it come down the right hole. And, I don't mean to exaggerate, but there's only a thin skin separating them."

"So," said old Antoine, "you are recommended for miles around as a herdsman who knows what's what."

"Yes, and the times I've said there's nothing to be done, you can go and fetch the vet from Provins, he won't take care of it any easier. Anyway, the man knows it, because once he gets there he's quick to spit and get back in his cart."

"Well, indeed!" cried Norine, nodding.

Jacques was watching the herdsman as he spoke. He was a short, thin, crooked man, rather bandy legged, with a strong Napoleonic profile and pale eyes that laughed at times and revealed, together with the line around his clean-shaven mouth, incorrigible cunning. On his feet



he wore slippers made from scraps of black-and-white plaited material, called "bamboches" in this corner of Brie, a blue striped shirt, a cardigan with black luster sleeves, ribbed velvet breeches held up by a leather belt, a tin horn slung diagonally across his shoulder, and a whip on his other shoulder.

"Come on, drink," reprimanded Norine, and again they clinked glasses. François wiped his lips with the back of his hand and, after a few more stories, he limped down the hill.

Then, pressed by questions from his nephew, old Antoine spoke about the herdsman. He explained that he had become rich. "Ah! It's because that's a good profession! Look, he buys a two-year-old bull for four hundred francs and sells it again for six when he's four years old. And during all that time, his bull being the only one in the village, he makes himself a pretty penny!"

And he enumerated the fortune: two francs per head of cattle per year, then a bushel of wheat and rye, eggs at Easter, a soft cheese when the cow calves, and wine at grape harvest. "And what does it take, I ask you, to maintain his bull so it stays sprightly, to lead the village cattle to the meadow, and to look after the sick ones when there are any? Ah, yes! It's a good profession," continued the old man, deep in thought, "François now has plenty—"

"But how many cows are there in Jutigny?"

"Well, I reckon there are two hundred and twenty-five at the moment."

"And inhabitants?"

"That would be around four hundred, my lad."

There was a silence. Louise and Norine came back from the cow shed where the young woman had ventured to take a look at the calf.

"If only you knew how sweet he is," she said to her husband. "Would you believe it, he drinks from a glass!"

"Yes, by forcing its mouth open and wriggling it around!" retorted Aunt Norine, who seemed unenthusiastic about this civilized way of drinking.

"Here, it's not like other places," continued the old man in a learned manner. "We don't let them suckle. We lose a few more that way, but then they don't follow their mother around and don't graze."

He burst out laughing. "Do you remember old Martin, the fruit dealer, Norine, who's there, in Jutigny, tossing his wealth out the window?" he added, turning to Jacques. "He thought he was pretty crafty just because he had been to Paris. He didn't realize that calves fatten up on milk alone. He said to me: 'Hey, old man! Why do you put a wicker



cage around your calf's muzzle?' And when I told him, 'But my dear fellow, so he won't eat the grass!' he laughed. Well then, when he brought his calf to the market in Bray, Achille said to him, after looking at the calf's bloodshot eyes, 'You might have a good republican there, but it's of no use to me,' and all the other butchers told him the same things, and to this day he still has his grass-eating calf!"

"So," asked Jacques, "the calf needs to be anemic, totally unhealthy, for it to sell?"

"Of course, my lad, if it wasn't, its meat wouldn't be edible!"

"It needs to put on fat so that it has more blood," said his wife, backing him up. "Listen, someone's ringing the bell at the upper door. Pooh! It's not worth getting up, it's open. You only have to give it a shove with your shoulder."

And, in fact, after a bang, footsteps were heard. Jacques stuck his head outside and made out a misshapen figure with short legs, limping and chubby.

"It's the postman!" said old Antoine.

"Well, indeed!"

The man was wearing an immense straw hat with a black ribbon around it on which were painted in red letter the words "Post Office," and over his blue canvas smock with madder-colored facing he wore a satchel. He reached behind him, dragged his feet, put down his walking stick, and said:

"Are you Mister Jacques Marles?"

"Yes."

He held out a letter and rebuckled his sack.

"I have a feeling you wouldn't say no to a drink," said Norine.

"I certainly wouldn't," he said.

"And how many liters have you drunk since you began your rounds?" old Antoine questioned, laughing.

"Oh! I've definitely drunk no more than seven!"

"Seven!" cried Louise.

"Him! Oh, my dear girl, he can guzzle ten without getting any drunker than he is now."

The postman looked both humble and satisfied at the same time. "Yes, but it's 'cause I eat," he said modestly.

"You hear, Louise, well, if you have any leftovers, he'll clean you out in the time it takes to dish it up. But where do you put all the stuff you gobble?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, and, as they brought him bread and cheese, he pulled out his knife, carved himself a chunk that would sat-



isfy a whole camp, put a little of the urinary rot they called blue cheese on top, and devoured the whole lot with enormous bites.

In the meantime, his jaws full, his cheeks bouncing as his temples ebbed and flowed, he complained about how long his rounds were. Nevertheless, at least for the time being, his route was good all the same. The landowners lived in their châteaux and that often made it longer, like coming to this one, for example, but here he was dealing with good honest people who never forgot the postman.

Jacques, absorbed in reading his letter, looked up at this bait for a tip, but the postman, whose eyes were shining and dancing in their own way under their hoods furrowed with wrinkles, was smugly detailing the benefits of his affluence. Up at the miller's place in Tachy, he always had a bottle and a crust and they often kept yesterday's stew for him. At the château of Sigy, it was even better. The gardener offered him fruit and salad vegetables, the lady made sure he had a bite to eat, and he never left with a dry throat. Besides, everyone liked him, because they knew who they were dealing with. Then, when they went back to Paris again, they always thought of his little family, for he had two children, and you can't make much money being a postman.

Wearied by this verbiage, folding his letter, Jacques mused over his growing troubles. A friend who had taken it upon himself to watch over his business in the capital had written him a worrisome letter.

Now it was confirmed that he was out of funds. His creditors had banded together in order to seize his furniture. And then there was Crédit Lyonnais's refusal to honor some promissory notes he had hoped to convert into cash.

"It isn't going well," he thought.

"Let's go and eat," said Louise, who was watching him.

"Well!" she resumed when they were alone. "What does Moran say?"

He passed the letter to her and she shook her head.

"How much money do we have?" he asked.

"Not much, eight hundred francs at most, because there have already been some expenditures," and she added with a sigh, "and it isn't over yet!"

"Why not?"

She went into explanations. First, it had been necessary to buy kitchen utensils and crockery for about fifty francs. They had needed supplies of coffee, brandy, sugar, pepper, salt, candles, coal, a whole series of purchases difficult to make from the isolated château.

Besides, the question of food became wildly complicated. The woman who was Savin's butcher, the only one in the whole area for



miles around, absolutely refused, as did all the other shopkeepers for that matter, to come to the château, which was not situated on her route. As for the woman who comes on Saturdays from Provins with supplies of vegetables, chickens, and eggs, the poultry seller as they call her, she declared she had no desire to wear out her horse by climbing the hill.

Only the baker consented to supply the bread, and then it was agreed that he would leave it downstairs, at the gate of the château at the end of the avenue, on the road to Longueville, at five o'clock in the evening.

"That's convenient," observed the young man. "When it rains we'll be eating wet breadcrumbs, bread soup."

"We'll buy a basket and put stones on the cover."

"But Uncle Antoine eats bread, too. Dammit! He could buy ours when he buys his."

"You wouldn't want it. Norine brings back several loaves at a time, so that after five or six days, it's as hard as rock. You don't know the half of it!"

Jacques made a gesture of discouragement.

"As for the wine," she continued, "we'll have to have a barrel sent from Bray-sur-Seine. Besides, Uncle Antoine, whose harvest was poor last year, was offering, if we have too much, to take half the barrel."

"And how much will this barrel cost?"

"About sixty francs."

Jacques sighed.

"Oh really! What did your uncle mean, then, when he assured us that we'd find everything here in plenty?"

"He didn't know. He probably thought we'd be living, like he does, off a few potatoes and some fruit."

"It seems from all this that we'll have to run two leagues into the countryside every day, whatever the weather, to find a chop and some cheese. But anyway, what about Jutigny? And Longueville? Aren't there any shopkeepers in those dumps?"

"No, Savin serves them. Anyway," she continued, "I hope we'll finally get organized, because Antoine's sister, old Armandine, knows a poor family in Savin whose little girl can't go to school at the moment. For a price, which still has to be settled, they'll send the child here each morning. We'll give her errands and she'll bring the things back after her afternoon meal."

Jacques was beginning to believe that the notion of saving money by moving to the country was an illusion and that the solitude, so attrac-



tive when you live in the heart of Paris, becomes unbearable when you actually experience it, in the middle of nowhere, with no servants or a coach.

And he went through all the inconveniences he had already encountered in the château: threatening men and animals as neighbors; the icy dampness; the lack of comfort and water shortage; and then even more renunciations that made him indignant. He had searched in vain in the labyrinth of rooms for a confessional for the body, a room designed to hide its hidden secrets. Downstairs, near the marquise's bedroom, he had finally discovered a water closet, but it was so decrepit that you could not enter without danger.

But that was the only one.

He had expressed his astonishment to Uncle Antoine, who had first opened his eyes wide, then looked at Norine.

She stamped her feet with joy, slapping her thighs.

"So you want to shit, Nephew," she said between two hiccups. "But you go outside, wherever you are, like we do!"

This simple way of resolving an embarrassing problem completely exasperated the young man.

And he grumbled about it for a good part of the day, which passed, moreover, without his noticing the hours trickling away.

The sedative effect of the countryside was still enveloping him, and he did not feel the boredom of idleness that descends on well-known rooms or familiar landscapes. He was still in the period of numbness, that blessed lassitude caused by fresh air, which blunts the intensity of any trouble and bathes the soul in drowsy, syncopic sensations, apathetic impressions of vagueness. But if the warmth of the mornings acted on him like a paregoric remedy, like a tranquilizer, the chilling lugubriousness of the twilight dispersed that tranquillity, just as it had on the first day, giving way to unsettled feelings of disquiet and imperturbable and confused suffering.

That evening, after dinner, he had gone down with his wife into the courtyard of the château, and, sitting on folding stools, they had silently watched the weary garden curl up and go to sleep. And although he still felt the distraction that distanced his mind from the ideas he wished to focus on, he felt, at this time of spiritual twilight, the mysterious humiliation of fear welling up inside him. He contemplated Louise. Good heavens! How pale she was! He shivered, for her drawn features revealed the continuing progress of neurosis, and he feared the next attacks of the unconquerable evil in this isolated ruin.

And in Jacques, the almost cozy uneasiness that had resulted from



his powerlessness, his utter lack of control, was transformed into clear anxiety. His scattered thoughts came together and focused on his situation and Louise's. He withdrew into his memories, went back over his life, remembering the good years they had had together. In order to marry her he had had to quarrel with his family, made up of rich merchants indignant at the base extraction of this woman, the offspring of a generation of peasants, which squared badly with a middle-class father. He had surmounted that hatred and accepted without regret a complete break with parents whose appetites and ideas he despised and whom he only rarely ever used to visit anyway.

For their part, they thought he was mad. Yes, good for nothing, but not mad yet, Jacques thought, aware of his family's opinion. Yes, it was true, he was good for nothing, incapable of embracing the exquisite occupations of men, inept at earning money or even at keeping it, indifferent to the lure of honors and the profit of gaining a position. It was not, however, that he was lazy, for he was very widely read, a far-reaching but scattered erudition, ingested without any particular aim, and consequently held in contempt by utilitarians and idlers alike.

The question he was trying hard to prune from his mind, the question of knowing which scheme he would use to earn his daily bread from now on, assailed him, more piercing and more stubborn, especially now that he contemplated his wife, who was slumped in her folding stool and doubtless also tortured by similar fears.

He rose and took a few steps into the courtyard.

Night had fallen and distorted the nave of the church opposite them, which passed through every shade of black: very dark, thickened by overcast shadows in places covered with ivy, less deep, more faded in places where the wall was bare, and dim light in the windows whose panes seemed filled with shadowy, troubled waters.

Jacques was contemplating the slow melting of stonework into darkness when, from the top of the church, a bird rose like an eagle, inscribing with its outstretched wings a stunning parabola, and fell from the sky with a muffled sound into the woods, where the crushed branches creaked.

"What's that?" asked Louise, who came and huddled near her husband.

"Oh, it's probably a screech owl. There's a proliferation of them in the church tower."

He took his wife's arm and they walked around the courtyard, seized by the vast silence of the countryside, that silence made up of the imperceptible noises of animals and plants that you can hear when you really listen.



The darkness had become more opaque and seemed to rise from the earth, drowning the pathways and the clumps of flowers, compressing the sparse bushes, rolling around the invisible tree trunks, clotting the twigs, filling in the gaps between the leaves joined in a single clump of shadow. And, while compact and dense beneath, the darkness gradually faded until it reached the tips of the pine trees, which had been spared.

Finally, above the church, the garden, the woods, high above in the harsh sky, the cold waters of the stars welled up. Most were icy, luminescent springs, while the ones that burned the most fiercely, seemed like upside-down geysers, inverted, hot, glowing springs. There was not a single wave, not a cloud, not a wrinkle in this firmament, which suggested the image of a solid sea scattered with liquid islands.

Jacques suddenly felt his whole body weaken from the giddiness of his gaze lost in space.

The immensity of this silent ocean with archipelagos lit up by feverish flames left him almost trembling, overwhelmed by the strange sensation of the unknown, of nothingness, of emptiness that alarms a stifled soul.

Louise had also let her eyes lose themselves in those distant abysses, following her husband, whose sight, distorted by the mirage of a fixed vision, was deluding him, picking out at random and at will brightly colored constellations where there were none, the lilac and yellow stars of Cassiopeia, Venus with the green planet, the red lands of Mars, the blue and white suns of Orion.

Guided by her husband, she, too, fancied she saw them. And she was left gasping at the effort, dazed when she looked before her, feeling in her stomach a kind of anguish that flowed into her legs, which had become unsteady and weak, vividly experiencing the feeling of a hand pulling her slowly inside-out, from top to bottom.

"I don't feel well," she said. "Let's go indoors."

And behind the château, the moon rose in its turn, full and round, like a gaping well descending into the depths, and bringing back to its silver coping buckets of pale fire.

## CHAPTER V

It was beyond all limits, indefinitely receding from view, an immense desert of dry plaster, a Sahara of frozen lime water, in the center of which rose a gigantic circular mountain with uneven sides, porous like a sponge, glittering with mica-tinted dots like grains of sugar on its crest of hard snow, hollowed out like a bowl.



Separated from this mountain by a valley whose bare floor seemed molded from a hardened mud of white lead and chalk, another mountain thrust a funnel-shaped, pewter summit to tremendous heights. It looked as though this mountain had been embossed, distended with enormous lumps and colossal waves, chipped at the corners, roasted in the fires of countless furnaces, and its globular ferment, suddenly compressed and instantly frozen, had remained intact.

"We must be," thought Jacques, "in the middle of the Ocean of Storms, and these two monstrous chalices stretching up toward the sky must be the crater-shaped summits of Copernicus and Kepler."

No, I haven't lost my way, he thought, contemplating the nearly flat, icy, milky surface, which bulged when you approached the foot of one of the peaks.

With calm certitude, he found his bearings. "Down there in the south, what vaguely appears like a great gulf is the Sea of Vapors, and those two horrifying chancres guarding the entrance are surely Mount Gassendi and Agatharchides." Smiling, he reflected that, for all that, the moon was a peculiar land where there was neither vapor, nor vegetation, nor earth, nor water, nothing but rocks and streams of lava, nothing but stratified cirques and extinct volcanos. And besides, why had astronomy kept those vague names, those antiquated, bizarre labels with which ancient astrologers had christened the strings of plains and mountains?

He turned to his wife who was sitting there, hypnotized by this whiteness, and he briefly explained to her that venturing into the south of this star would be imprudent, for that is where the volcanic zone is, a conglomeration of extinct craters, overlapping sierras, cordilleras almost touching one another, leaving barely enough space for the rugged paths around their foothills, paths that seemed cut out of limestone or bored through lead oxide.

He finally helped her up. She was listening to him, peering at his lips, understanding his words but not hearing them at all, since no atmospheric environment could propagate sound on this planet devoid of air. And, turning their backs to the landscape they had been contemplating, they climbed northward again, along the Carpathian range, crossing the Aristarchus gorge whose peaks stood out against the horizon, barbed like crayfish tails, toothed like combs. They progressed easily, sliding rather than walking on a sort of frosty ice, below which appeared vague crystallized ferns whose veins and ribs gleamed like furrows of quicksilver. They fancied they were walking on flat copses, on laminated arborizations, spread out under the diaphanous, solid water.



They emerged on a new plain, the Sea of Rains, and there again, positioning themselves on a knoll, they towered above a landscape which receded as far as the eye could see, spiked by Alps of lime, dented by Etnas of salt, swollen with tubercles, bloated with cysts, scorified like cinders.

And similarly, on a strategic level, innumerable Chimborazo could sweep the plain from these immense heights: Euler and Pytheas, Timocharis and Archimedes, Autolycus and Aristillus, and, in the north, almost bordering on the Sea of Cold, by the Bay of Rainbows whose stony banks curved along the smooth ground where the incredible Mount Plato burst, its crust broken up by lava, several leagues away, rose stucco rods and marble masts, descending in giant rolls of alabaster, tumbling down in a mass of white rocks pierced with holes like madrepora, gleaming like the bottom of a miner's jigger.

It looked as though all this was lit by itself. The light seemed to radiate, rising from the ground. For up there, the firmament was black, absolutely, intensely black, sprinkled with stars that burned for themselves alone, motionless, without spreading any light.

At its base Aristillus resembled a Gothic city, with its peaks like teeth in the air, cutting the starry basalt sky with their blades. And on either side of this city, two other cities were superimposed, mixing the Moorish architecture of a Grenada with the Middle Ages of a Heidelberg, becoming entangled in a confusion of countries and centuries, minarets and bell towers, spires and points, loopholes and crenels, machicolations and domes, the monstrous trinity of a dead metropolis, formerly carved into a mountain of silver by torrents of fiery liquid!

And down below, all these cities were outlined by harsh black shadows, shadows two leagues long, and simulated a heap of enormous surgical instruments, colossal saws, vast lancets, exaggerated probes, monumental needles, titanic trephines, Herculean cupping glasses, a whole surgical instrument case for Atlas and Encelades, tipped out in a jumble onto a white cloth.

Jacques and his wife remained stunned, doubting the clarity of their sight. They rubbed their eyes, but, as soon as they reopened them, the same vision confounded them: that of a town washed in silver against a background of night, projecting with jutting patterns of darkness the precise shapes of shadowy instruments scattered before an operation on a white sheet.

Louise took her husband's arm and descended onto the plain. Turning to their right, they entered a small valley hemmed by Timocharis and Archimedes on one side and, on the other, the Apennines, among



which Eratosthenes and Huygens raised their bulbous demijohns, which gradually tapered to finish in open bottlenecks sealed with white wax.

"All the same, it's very strange," said Jacques. "Here we are at the Marsh of Decay, and it isn't a marsh, and it doesn't smell of anything! It's true that the Sea of Storms is perfectly dry and that the Sea of Secretions, which one would imagine to be greasy like a lake of pus, is just an exorbitant plate of cracked earthenware, edged by lava with gray lines!"

Louise flared her nostrils and inhaled the lack of air. No, no smell existed in this Marsh of Decay. No exhalation of calcium sulfide indicating the dissolution of a putrifying carcass, no aroma of dead bodies saponifying or of decomposing blood, no charnel. Nothing, emptiness, a void of aroma and a void of sound, suppressing the senses of smell and hearing. And Jacques even loosened with the bottom of his foot blocks of stone which hurtled down, rolling like balls of paper, without a sound.

They continued with weary spirit. This marsh, crystallized like a salt lake, undulated as if pockmarked by hail, riddled with round marks as wide as those pools built at Versailles in the reign of the Great King. In places, imaginary streams zigzagged, streaked by who knows what refraction, with the purplish gray lines of iodines. In others, unreal canals rejoined false ponds tinted with the unwholesome red of bromines. In still others, incurable wounds raised pink vesicles on this flesh of pale ore.

Jacques consulted the map he kept folded in the pocket of the English-made garment he did not remember wearing until this moment. The map, published in Gotha courtesy of Justus Perthes, seemed indisputably clear to him, with its stippled area, its details in relief, its Latin designations: "*Lacus Mortis, Palus Putredinis, Oceanus Procellarum*," borrowed from Beer and Maedler's old *Mappa Selenographica*, of which this was only a scaled-down copy.

"Let's see," he said to himself. "We can choose from two paths. Either we go down the strait formed by the edge of the Sea of Serenity and the pass on Mount Haemus, or we go up again, through the Caucasus Gorge right to the edge of the Lake of Dreams, and then go down, following the Taurus Mountains right to the Jansen."

The latter appeared to be the easier and the wider path, but it made his planned itinerary longer by thousands of leagues. He resolved to thread his way through the paths on Haemus, but he stumbled with Louise at each step between the walls of petrified sponge and white coke, on warty ground, swollen by hardened bubbles of chlorine. Then



they found themselves in front of a sort of tunnel and they had to let go of each other's arms and walk, one after the other, into this narrow passageway that resembled a crystal tube whose illuminated edges, like the points of a diamond, lit up the route. Suddenly, the vault rose, shooting up into the chimney of a great furnace, blocked at the top by a circle of black sky, an incalculable distance above them.

"We're here," murmured Jacques. "This opening is the hollow peak of Menelaus." And, indeed, the tunnel came to an end. They emerged near the Archerusia Promontory, not far from the Rimae Plinius, in the Sea of Tranquillity, whose contours simulate the whitened image of a belly sigilated with a navel by the Jansen, sexed as a girl by the great V of a gulf, forked with two spread legs with club feet by the Seas of Fertility and Nectar.

They went rapidly toward Mount Jansen, leaving to their left the Marsh of Sleep, tinged with yellow like a pond of coagulated bile, and the Sea of Crises, a plateau of solidified mud, milky green like jade.

They scaled steep slopes, then sat down.

Then an extraordinary spectacle took place before them.

As far as the eye could see, a furious sea rolled with silent waves as high as cathedrals. Everywhere there were cataracts of curdled foam, petrified avalanches of waves, torrents of aphonic clamoring, the whole exasperation of a storm, compacted and anesthetized in a single gesture.

It spread so far that the disconcerted eye lost all sense of proportion, accumulating over leagues and leagues, more or less without distance and time.

Here, sedentary maelstroms swelled in immobile spirals that descended lethargically into bottomless chasms. There, indeterminate sheets of foam, convulsive Niagaras, destructive columns of water overhung the depths, with silent roars, paralyzed leaps, crippled and subdued eddies.

He became pensive, wondering what cataclysms had frozen these hurricanes and extinguished these craters? What tremendous compression of the ovaries had checked the sacred illness, the epilepsy of this world, the hysteria of this planet — spitting fires, the whirlwinds, the rebellions — turned upside-side on its lava bed? What incontestable plea had brought the cold Selenia into a state of catalepsy amid the indissoluble silence that had hovered for eternity beneath the immutable shadow of an incomprehensible sky?

What dreadful seeds were thus born of these desolate mountains, these Himalayas with charred and hollow bodies? What cyclones had tainted these Pacifics and scalped the unknown vegetation on their



shores? What reputed deluges of fire, what bygone bolts of lightning had scarified the shell of this star, marked by grooves deeper than river-beds, hollowed into ditches in which ten Brahmaputras could easily have flowed?

And further on, further on still, other mountain chains emerged from the circle of imagined horizons whose interminable peaks brushed the sky's cap of darkness, a cap simply placed on the nailheads of the summits, waiting for a supernatural hammer to drive it in with one blow to hermetically seal the indestructible box!

Plaything of an immense Titan, of an infantile and enormous giant-ess, a grandiloquent box containing sugar models of storms and plains, cardboard rocks and hollow volcanos in whose hole a Polyphema's child could stick his little finger and thus lift into space the colossal framework of this extraordinary toy, the Moon: it appals one's reason and terrifies human frailty.

And now Jacques felt that weight in the pit of his stomach, that contraction of his bladder brought about by sustained dread of the void.

He looked at his wife. She was calm, and, with her completely motionless pince-nez, was consulting the map that she held, folded out on her knees, like an Englishwoman studying her guide.

This tranquillity, this proof of having a manifest, living being near him, that he could touch if he wanted, calmed his agony. The vertigo, which had pulled his eyes out of his eyelids and drawn them slowly toward the bottom of the chasm, vanished now that his vision was focused on a familiar creature two paces away, whose existence was tangible and certain.

Then he felt empty underneath his clothes, like those tubulous mountains with no metalloid entrails, no heart of rock, no veins of granite, no lungs of metal. He felt light, almost fluid, ready to fly away if the unknown winds of this star blew up. The bitter cold of the poles and the dismaying scorching heat of the Equators succeeded each other without transition around him, without him even noticing it, for he felt as if he were finally rid of the temporary shell of his body; but the horror of this mournful desert, of this sepulchral silence, of this silent knell, was suddenly revealed. The tormented death throes of the Moon lying beneath the gravestone of the heavens threw him into turmoil. He looked up in order to escape.

"Look," said his wife artlessly, "they are lighting up!"

Indeed, at that very moment the sun brushed the mountaintops, whose torn crests radiated like molten metal in white flames. Glimmers of light crept along the peaks in the center of which the cone of



Tycho teemed tremendously, opening a mouth of pink flame, gnashing teeth of embers, baying noiselessly in the unchanging silence of a still firmament.

"The view is more beautiful than the terrace of Saint Germain," continued Louise with conviction.

"Without a doubt," he said, surprised by the stupidity of his wife, which until then had seemed less considerable and less blatant.

## CHAPTER VI

A few days passed. One morning, returning to his room after a walk in the country, Jacques found his wife sitting there pale, limp, and overcome.

"No, I'm alright, but I can't comb my hair. As soon as I lift my arm, I feel faint. I'm not in any pain. On the contrary, it's all happening inside me very gently. You know, it's as if I had a heavy heart, I'm suffocating."

"It's nothing to worry about," she continued, with a sigh, and with a great effort of will, she stood up and took a step. "It's strange, it seems as though the floor of the room were moving, as if it were doing the walking, not me."

Suddenly, she cried out sharply and threw her right foot forward, with the sharp action of a kick boxer.

Jacques carried her to the bed, where these kicks continued, one after the other, minute after minute, preceded each time by a cry. Pains like electric shocks ran down her legs, vanishing only after the crackling jolt of a spark ended, only to return, spreading along her thighs, bursting out again with sudden discharges.

Jacques sat down, knowing he was helpless against this evil that had exhausted all suppositions, all formulae. He remembered the consultations of doctors who talked of an incurable ailment, of metritis, and acknowledged its ongoing progression beneath the asthenia aggravated by rest and by drugs, and that all the cauterizations, all the bloodletting, all the probes, all the distressing examinations, all the abominable maneuvers the poor woman had had to undergo had been in vain.

After having descended into the body's crypts where they had sought traces of this obtuse sensation that habitually weighed on the invalid, the doctors, worried they had found nothing, had changed their tactics, one after the other, attributing the malaise of the entire organism to an illness whose roots extended everywhere and yet were nowhere to be found. They prescribed tonics, tried large doses of bromide, resorted to morphine to deaden the pain, waiting for a symptom to



guide them, so that they would not have to grope in this sea of unknown and vague ills.

The charlatans, whom one always consults when one has realized the decisive ineffectiveness of medicine, did not understand it clearly. At best, one of them had discovered a remedy that somewhat worked, but what a remedy! By pressing a metal plate on the precise point of pain, it would move away, and one had to follow it, give it chase, track it down, only to end up in implacable dead ends from which it bounced back, as if launched by a vibrating trampoline into the entanglement of nerves.

On the other hand, a Bolognese pharmaceutical invented by a certain Count Mattei and known as "Green Electricity" in homeopathic schisms occasionally countered the attack, almost conjured away the pain, and nearly brought the fits under control, but its results were fickle. After having produced an effect for some time, this mysterious water stopped working.

Jacques pensively watched his wife, who had buried her face in her pillow and whose ice-cold body was undulating underneath the sheets. Having gone back to the source of this illness, his thoughts now retraced the course of her fits, and then returned to the present, to the château of Lourps, and then raced ahead, calculating the disease's path into the unknown regions of the future.

From when did it date and from what disasters did this disconcerting nervous madness stem? Nobody knew. After they had married, doubtless, following internal disorders that false shame had concealed for as long as possible from the hesitant diagnoses of the doctors and the improvident approaches of her husband. This had dragged on for years, influencing only her physical health, then it gradually infiltrated her mind, sapping it at its base, and finally arranged everything in awful equilibrium; the burden of her metritis matched her spiritual torpor, the faintness of her ravaged stomach, the languor of her declining will.

And gradually, a crack had formed in the household's cargo hatch, a crack through which the money had leaked. Louise, so vigilant, on her watch since they had been married, had slackened off, leaving the maid to run the ship. They had immediately sprung a dirty leak. The day the maid went to market, a blockade of coarse crones descended on Jacques's purse, supplying vegetables that had been carried along in the gutter, worm-eaten pears full of black specks like snuffboxes, apples with moldy flesh already gnawed on by cats. The fish was suspect and the meat white, drained by the odious extraction of its blood, which was then sold separately.



The food was both costly and sordid. As if shaken by an unrelenting chorea, the shopping basket tossed money out and these spasms did not go unnoticed by the tradesmen. The coal merchant adulterated his weights and reduced the size of his sacks, the polisher only indolently shined the parquet floor that suffered from a want of wax, the laundry-woman resorted to the tricks of her trade and massacred the linen, exchanged it, forgot to bring it back, lost it, messed up handkerchiefs and invoices, and clever folding to hide the bleach stains and iron burns.

Louise felt powerless to react, and let herself be pushed around, frightened by the idea of making an effort, risking remarks, or initiating a fight. However, this feeling of helplessness gnawed at her like a feeling of remorse, interrupting her sleep, aggravating her nervous condition with its needling continuity.

She wore herself out in this inner struggle, giving herself orders she was not able to obey, and she ended up burying her head like a despondent child, wanting to believe that the fraud no longer existed if she closed her eyes.

Jacques had not been without complaint in this debacle, but his wife's distressed face, the silent pleading of her eyes, disarmed him. Noticing that Louise's state deteriorated, as soon as he scowled, he too was content to sit around and let things happen, afraid of her lack of energy, of this painful silence from a wife he knew once to be zealous and lively in her work.

Now he reflected with melancholy on the progressive disorganization of his innermost thoughts. Ah! It was beyond remedy now! And a silent rebellion surged up inside him. After all, he had not married in order to renew the disorder of his bachelor's existence. What he had wanted was the removal of odious details, the soothing of the pantry, the silence of the kitchen, a cozy atmosphere, a downy subdued environment, a rounded existence, without any ragged edges to draw attention to problems. He wanted to live in a blessed haven, in a cushioned ark, sheltered from the wind, and also be in the company of his wife, her skirts whisking away the restlessness of futile cares, guarding him like a mosquito net from the stings of every little thing that bothered him, keeping the room at a controlled and even temperature. He wanted to have everything at hand without having to wait or go to the shops, love and broth, linen and books.

Being such a solitary person, not very open to new faces or very sociable, loathing company, and having finally earned his reputation as an old bear and the trying advantages that go along with it (for, weary of his refusals, people now spared him from vexing excuses by not



inviting him any more), he had realized his dream of calmness by marrying a penniless orphan girl, with no family to visit, quiet and devoted, practical and honest, who let him ferret quietly through his books, waited on his odd habits, and safeguarded them without disturbing them.

How far off all that was! How the calm he had experienced living side by side with a wife whose verbiage was modest and consequently tolerable and who did not need to go out to soirées and theaters, had been short-lived!

With the first premonitory symptoms of her inexplicable illness, the atmosphere at home had rapidly changed. The rather overcast morning that he liked to feel around him had been transformed into a long and dreary winter evening. The inert and taciturn Louise did smile, though, proving to Jacques that her affection remained intact, but she somehow implored him with a hesitant, tender look, like that of a cat lying on one's clothes, that she be left alone, not chased away, not forced to go and find another place to lie.

And he grew irritated at this onslaught of memories, which each sent a shooting pain through his wound. Was it his fault that he organized himself in such a way that he could not bear for his life to drift, and that, with all his curiosities and passions, he needed peace and quiet at all costs? He was a man who would read some bizarre phrase in a newspaper or a book about religion, science, history, art, or anything else and get carried away and rush headlong into studying it, throwing himself into antiquity one day, recalling his Latin, slogging away like a fanatic, then, suddenly disgusted with his work and research, he would abandon everything for no apparent reason. Then one day he would launch himself into contemporary literature, ingesting the content of copious books, thinking of nothing but, not even sleeping, until one morning he would quit in a sudden about-turn, and he would daydream in his boredom, waiting for another subject he could swoop onto. Pre-history, theology, the Cabala had in turn demanded and held his attention. He had scoured libraries, exhausted portfolios of sketches, clogged up his intellect in skimming the surface of this jumble, and all this through idleness and momentary attraction, without seeking a conclusion and without a practical goal.

In this game he had acquired a great deal of muddled knowledge, more than one approximation, and less than one certitude. An absence of energy, a curiosity that was too sharp to be crushed immediately, a lack of order in his ideas, a weakening of his spiritual boundaries, which were promptly twisted, an excessive passion for running along forked roads and wearying of the path as soon as he had started on it, mental



indigestion demanding varied dishes, quickly tiring of the foods he desired, digesting almost all, but badly, was his state.

Rolling thus in the dust of time, he had tasted some delightful moments, but since Louise's foresight had dissipated, worn out by the sawing of her nerves, he had remained full of consternation, defenseless, against the financial problems that froze his intellectual passions and brutally threw him back into the inextricable meshes of real life.

And now that he had no money left, what would happen? He shook his head in desperation. Moral and physical decline, utter poverty will follow, he told himself, and he took pleasure in exaggerating the horrors the future would hold, going straight from begging to a lack of bread, from the poorhouse for his wife to the lowest depths of mendicancy for himself.

As always happens to unfortunate and anxious people who leap from the soaring heights to extremity and even experience some consolation in realizing they could fall no lower, Jacques stepped back and calmed down, assuring himself that his fears were excessive. Everything sorts itself out in the end. He repeated this axiom, dear to poor devils who manage to eat and live despite everything, when they can not reasonably expect anything more, and in repeating it to himself, banked on the unexpected, counted on the future, trusted in fate or chance.

After all, he thought, my affairs can be worked out without resorting to chimera! When I return to Paris, I will perhaps recover a few debts and settle down in a peaceful district.

He plunged down this path: I could sell the best part of my furniture and my books; he went through them, first sacrificing the objects he valued the least, then hesitating for a few seconds over some of them. Nevermind! he concluded, I must disencumber myself and keep just enough to furnish two rooms!

And it was not without some joy that he gave himself over to this selection of trinkets and books. His affections, scattered over entire libraries and rooms, concentrated themselves, focusing on the few objects he planned to keep. He loved them all the more for it, and this new outburst of affection for certain volumes, for certain pieces of furniture, almost made him wish he could immediately get rid of the others he suddenly no longer cared for.

It would be delightful, he thought, to furnish a little kitchen and two little rooms with my choicest trinkets, and he pictured them larger than life, gaily lit against the background of a garden sheltered from the flurry of the streets. He would allow for the expense of some wallpaper without branches or flowers, matte and dark. Here, his bed, which he



would keep, and his violet and anise wood bedside table. There, his desk, two armchairs, three chairs, a rug, and a fireguard. Then, in the hearth, his wrought-iron andirons with flourished feet and heads elongated into pear shapes. Finally, on the mantelpiece, the carved and painted wooden bust of a peasant from the late Middle Ages, praying with his hands crossed over a book, lifting his pleading and woeful eyes toward the heavens. On each side of this bust, his two flat-based copper candlesticks and his two medicine jars, decorated with the coat of arms of a monastery, two jars that had doubtless contained an ancient monastery's electuary, diascordium, and theriac.

In the other room he would place his books on simple black-painted shelves, thus forming a library-cum-dining-room.

He smiled, anxious and even impatient to realize this intimate home. It seemed to him that he would be more snug, more at home, more at ease in these suburban rooms than in his Parisian apartment with its vast rooms.

Oh no, that wasn't possible! He tumbled from the heights right down to the depths of his dream. I don't even have the means of fallen people to withdraw into a corner, to confine myself in a hole and live a working man's life, for, in order to realize this modest dream, I need an economical and robust wife! And Louise, since she has been ill, is fit for nothing. What can one do with a disabled wife, sitting in a corner and stamping her feet? And then . . . and then . . . who knows if her health will get worse and, not having the money to care for her, if I will become her nurse?

Ah! If only he were alone, how much better his life would be! If he could do it all over again, he certainly would not get married! Suppose, after all, that Louise died: once the tears dried up, he could, without suffering too much, await new events. He could struggle along somehow until he had found a place. He could perhaps find a stocky, stolid wife, expert at running a household, a wife who was a cleric's servant and a mistress too, who did not impose very long fasts on her lover! Oh yes! He would suffer this sexual abstinence that his wife's illness was putting him through right to the bitter end!

He would not mind this mistress being a little plump, with her skin not too rosy, though he would like her to . . .

Ah, indeed! But I am simply being vile! he thought, as though suddenly woken from a dream, looking at the suffering Louise closing her eyes. He remained dumbfounded by this sudden explosion of filth inside him, for he truly loved his wife and would have given everything he owned to cure her.



At the thought that he could lose her, sobs rose to his lips. He leaned toward her and kissed her, as if to compensate for this involuntary explosion of selfishness, as if to undermine the vileness of his reflections.

She smiled at him: at that moment she, too, was reviewing her life, weeping for her wretched body and wasted existence, disorientated by the approach of poverty.

She told herself that her husband would never be capable of anything. Of course, she could not complain. He was good, affectionate, almost tender some days, although usually absorbed in his books and distracted from loving attention by his studies. But what carelessness when it came to his interests! Many times she had worried about his investments, she being more sly and distrustful than he in these matters. He would shrug his shoulders. Ah! The imbecile had let himself be duped by a banker whom he respected solely because this shady dealer never talked business and took an interest in art! How many times had she become exasperated at her husband, who was possibly a superior man in some sort of way but who was without a doubt a fool in practice!

What could be done? For years she had tried to save her household from dangers and traps, but as soon as it was a question of money, she had continually come up against a husband who did not respond, buried his head in his books, and grumbled impatiently. And she had had to refrain from reproaching him from then on, repeating that, after all, this little fortune was not her own, feeling herself to be, as it were, in the false situation of one who participates in a well-being that does not belong to her.

Today ruin had arrived, utter ruin, and she felt the fury of a housewife toward the husband who did not know how to dock his ship. She was even astounded to have thought that she had no right to impose her will, to speak out. All in all, this fortune had belonged to her since the wedding. If she had not brought Jacques any dowry, she had at least surrendered to him the riches of her sex, and what generosity was great enough to pay for them! Although she was neither enamored of herself nor besotted with pride, she inevitably thought, like all women, that possession of her body was an inestimable gift. Like all women, too, wives, daughters, or mistresses, she also thought husbands, fathers, or lovers had been put on this earth to provide for the needs of women, to support them, to be, in a word, their workhorses.

Besides, was she not enviable and pretty when he had married her, had she not provided wild nights, and had she not also been constantly attentive to Jacques's wishes, vigilant and tender? When all was said and done, she had struck a fool's bargain in marrying, for he had de-



frauded her. Through his negligence he had stolen her contented existence from her and criminally aggravated the agonies of her illness with the menacing prospect of poverty!

Ah! If she could do it all over again, she would not get married! Then a flash of common sense came to her. What would have become of her without a family or dowry? Her fate was un hoped for. She had married a man who pleased her and who, in a world of profit, had chosen her despite her poverty. All in all, apart from his lack of interest in real life, what could she reproach him? Nothing, not even, during this period of sexual deprivation he was undergoing, a brief escapade!

She regretted her unfairness. Sitting up a little on the bed, she called Jacques and kissed him, as if to compensate for this involuntary explosion of selfishness and undermine the vileness of her reflections.

Yet, in spite of those fits of self-interest that had suddenly shaken them so brutally, Jacques and Louise were good people, happy to live together, inept at the deceitful behavior of fashionable society, incapable of being unfaithful to one another, ready to make sacrifices for each other without any qualms.

Insidiously attacked, unexpectedly caught up in a force that was independent of their will, they incarnated the lamentable example of the unconscious ignominy of upright souls. They were, in short, victims of those terrible thoughts that creep into the minds of even the best people, thoughts that make a son who adores his parents not so much aspire to do without them but involuntarily dream with a certain complacency about the moment of their death.

No doubt, this painful thought upsets him. He is stirred to the pit of his stomach by the sudden vision of their bodies being placed in a coffin. He sees himself weeping hot tears, but he also feels a slow sweetness flooding through him first, when he pictures himself at the cemetery surrounded by people watching him, who, by their very presence, stimulate his desire to be valued, his satisfaction at being pitied, who satisfy this slight need for drama that is no doubt within everybody.

Then, fatally, when the awful spectacle of the funeral ceremony has disappeared, he envisages his future, advancing himself the comfortable existence he will be able to lead when he is his own master.

It is also this same ferment of illicit ideas that makes a widower with children unable to avoid ruminating over how different his fate would be if he were alone. And he plunges into conjecture, dreams of the future, constructs a life of freedom, revels in this evocation of another life, obviously not going so far as to wish his children would disappear but yielding to the appeal of imagining they no longer exist, and stops there.



As firm and valiant as one may be, nobody escapes these vague and mysterious impulses that surround desire from afar, nurture it, raise it up, hide it in the most concealed sewers of the soul.

And these irrational, morbid, veiled impulses, these simulations of temptation, these diabolical suggestions, as believers would say, are born above all in those unfortunate ones whose life is dismasted, for it is one of the peculiar traits of anguish to unrelentingly set on the lofty souls it knocks down by planting the seeds of loathsome thoughts in them.

Ashamed and moved, Louise and Jacques looked at one another in silence.

"My poor dear," said Louise finally, "you must be hungry and I can't get up to light the fire. See if there's any meat left over from yesterday. The little girl from Savin is coming, anyway. Ah! If only I could move!"

"Don't worry about me. Look, here's some veal, some bread, and some wine, I don't need any more than that."

He moved the table close to the bed and, without much appetite, struggled with the tasteless veal and hard bread.

There were some footsteps on the stairs.

"It's the child," said Louise, sitting up. "Give her the list of provisions to buy, it's there in the corner on the mantelpiece."

A little girl entered, a fair-haired child with a crescent-shaped, freckled nose and big, round blue-and-white eyes. She wiggled her hips, sniffing and scratching her apron with her nails.

"Here you are, darling, here's the list for your mummy. You're to bring back the purchases in the afternoon."

The child hung her head without moving.

"Your father's a grocer, isn't he? Do you know if he has any Gruyère?"

She looked up with her bulging eyes and soundlessly opened her mouth like a carp.

"Do you know what Gruyère is?"

"Mummy does laundry, she told me to tell the lady," the child suddenly blurted.

"Well!" continued Louise, who had been concerned about the matter of laundry for a couple of days. "You can tell your mummy to come and see me tomorrow."

The child nodded. "What's that?" she exclaimed suddenly, pointing to a pot of face powder.

"Well, she's decided to talk," cried Jacques. He placed the unstoppered pot under her nose, but the child drew back, made a face, and spat around the pot, like cats do around a plate of liver that is not fresh.

She declared that the smell of the powder made her feel sick.



"Go and get some fresh air, that will make you feel better, and don't forget our errands. Good-bye. Look, here comes the postman. Do you have a letter?"

"I don't reckon so, I have a newspaper," and the man sat down, put his straw hat on the ground, stuck his stick between his legs, pulled a satchel off his back, and handed Jacques a newspaper, all the while looking attentively at the veal left on the plate.

He seemed even more drunk than usual.

Jacques offered him a glass of wine.

He raised it to wish good health to all, and knocked it back in one gulp.

"That's good, but it gives you a real appetite," he said, still staring at the plate.

Louise invited him to sit at the table. So he approached, drew his knife, sliced a hunk of bread, tore it open and stuffed a piece of meat into the middle, and devoured the bread and the veal, with dreadful chewing noises.

He sucked the blade of his knife before closing it up, and, winking, his eyes like a basement window through which passed the flames that smoldered underneath his tanned skin:

"Are you ill then, my little lady?" he said to Louise.

"Yes, her legs hurt," replied Jacques.

"Oh, don't talk to me about that, there's no pain worse than that. I've been there, weeks flat on my back without moving, but that's not lifting a finger compared to a fall I had — and I thought I'd die from it — it will soon be two years since it happened and I'm still limping. You know, someone picked me up off the Donnemarie road, from a ditch. I was, so to speak, done for, not breathing, nothing. They called out: Old Mignot! Old Mignot! I couldn't hear them at all. Constant's son and big François can tell you"

"Were you well looked after, at least?" asked Louise.

"Yes, indeed, it was voting time. M. Pathelin was in for the Reds and M. Berthulot was for the Kings, they sent their doctor to see me twice a day. And it was good Bordeaux, hoary stuff they brought me. Once the votes were over, on my honor, I never saw the doctors or the wine again. And I had to take care of myself at my expense too! By the way, what time is it?"

"Half past twelve."

The postman rose and took his stick again.

"See you again soon," he said, waving behind his back, and he went downstairs.



Louise had collapsed again, exhausted, onto her bed.

"If only I could sleep," she sighed.

"I'll leave you," said Jacques: "Until the girl from Savin comes back, you'll have time for a nap."

He was preparing to go out when hurried steps shook the staircase and the postman reappeared, bareheaded, holding his hat, his hand holding its two wings together, closing it as if it were a straw basket.

He opened it out on the floor and something alarmed leapt out, a strange creature with enormous, gray, hooked claws, topped with a very small body rolled in white down, a grimacing, awful head with motionless, round eyes, the beak of an eagle, which made it scowl, and the scared face of an old monkey.

"It's a little screech owl that tumbled out of its nest into the nettles at the foot of the church."

And the postman touched it with the tip of his boot. The creature walked with difficulty, sideways like a crab, and finally reached a corner of the room where it stopped, its face against the wall.

"Ah, really, what do you want me to do with this animal?" asked Jacques.

"Well, if you don't want it, I'll take it to the priest in Chalmaison. He'll give me a twenty-sous piece for it. That man, he's got butterflies, birds, moles that he stuffs! He's got some, it's so funny, that look like they're dancing, and frogs on their hind legs fighting each other!"

"I don't want anyone to kill it," said Louise. "It must be returned to the foot of the church, its mother will come and collect it."

"I don't reckon so. Children will find it and play skittles with it using stones."

And, picking up the motionless creature in the corner, he carried it toward the bed while it shivered with fear, its eyes vacant, blinded by the daylight, its wings still wrapped in a cocoon of incredibly fine, unexpectedly white fluff.

"So, it doesn't suit you, then? Come and see the Priest, Pierrot," he said, shutting it in his strawhat again. "I'll need to hurry along, as it's a good ways. Are you sure you don't want it?"

"No, thank you," said Jacques.

"You should have given him twenty shillings for him to put that screech owl back near the church," continued Louise, when the postman had gone downstairs.

Jacques shrugged his shoulders and suddenly revealed some common sense: "He would have taken the twenty shillings and still have left for Chalmaison!"



In order to let his wife rest, he went out, walked aimlessly down pathways, then went to see Aunt Norine and found the door locked. Husband and wife were in the fields.

"Ah! You can't rely on them to help when you're ill," he thought. "They must be in the Graffignes vineyard. What if I went and joined them?"

He did not go, for he remembered the extraordinary difference that existed between Aunt Norine and Uncle Antoine sitting at home and Aunt Norine and Uncle Antoine working their land. Resting, they were amiable people, attentive to their niece and helpful. At work, they were scornful, careless in their replies, not hiding their complete disdain. It seemed as if they were fulfilling a vocation while they were rummaging in liquid manure and as if they were the only ones in the world working. Then they were cheeky and, though usually quite humble, stole insolent looks at the Parisian who did not even know how wheat grows.

"Well, you can't learn that in Paris, I shouldn't think," sniggered Norine, and Uncle Antoine gave unsolicited explanations in a learned voice.

"See, Nephew, the earth isn't like the pavement in your towns, it works, but like us it needs rest too. When one year it has given wheat, well, the coming year we sow it with oats, and the next year we plant it with potatoes or beets, then we take the wheat again and sometimes it even needs to rest without being touched for a whole year after harvest. You might be a crafty person from Paris, but you can't learn about the earth in a day!"

Well, thought Jacques, they won't shower me with their refrain of complaints again, and I will not listen to them repeat that they are aching all over, that it is really hard breaking their backs at their age, while I earn as much money as I like doing nothing.

Oh, yes! I do earn some, he thought bitterly. It is astonishing how much I earn! And how much I am capable of earning! And he wondered, as he did every day, how he was going to live once he returned to Paris. But this question remained unanswered, for he vowed modestly that he was good for nothing. What about at the château? The money was disappearing, and the next arrival of wine ordered at Bray would end up depleting his purse. All things considered, it would have been better not to have escaped to the country, to have stood up to the assailants, to struggle in Paris, to set up home in some other way, and not to waste what little money he did have at the château of Lourps. But he had been weary, and Louise was so unwell! And anyway, he had counted on collecting debts owed to him at Ormes.

Ah! That friend whom he had once obliged and who now refused to



reimburse him. And he is rich, I know it, he thought angrily. Yet he had been such a generous boy in the past! How the provinces reveal a man's true colors!

My goodness! How bored I am, he sighed. And like all weary people, he dreamed of being elsewhere, wished he could flee far from Lourps, abroad, no matter where, to leave his worries and cares in the lurch, to forget his life, to take on a new soul and a new skin. Well! It would be the same everywhere, he told himself. I could be transported to another planet and still, from the moment it became habitable, there would be poverty there, too. And he smiled, for this idea of another planet reminded him of his dreams from the night before, his journey across the Moon. This time, he thought, the source of my dream is clear, the filiation easier to trace than it was for my dream of Esther, for the evening before I left for the ancient star, I was looking at the stars and the Moon and remember that I clearly recalled then the details of the selenographic maps I have.

And through his reflections on this and that, he suddenly remembered he needed to draw some water for the household chores.

He proceeded toward the well and decided that the winch would have figured favorably among medieval instruments of torture. One had to hang on it and lean over while turning the handle to prevent the pail from tumbling with a fright into the chasm, for fear of undoing the rope held on by a single nail in the winch's wooden spool. Then one had to turn the opposite way and, deafened by the creaking of the dry pulley, raise the pail, which weighed at least one hundred pounds. He turned and turned exhaustedly, watching the rope, hoping it would finally come up from the hole wet, thus heralding the imminent arrival of the pail.

Would it never end? It's curious, he said to himself, it seems lighter than usual. Ah! Here's the rope, it isn't wet! He reached for the pail, which appeared at the level of the coping. It was empty.

That's just what I needed, he said, the well has probably dried up. What a mess we're in!

He sat down, disheartened. Let's see, I must warn Uncle Antoine. He knows the habits of wells better than I.

But neither old Antoine nor his wife had returned from the fields.

He did not see them again until the evening, when, lured by the idea of having a drink, they visited their niece.

"Well, what's the matter with you?"

"Oh, good God, is it really possible!" they exclaimed as she suddenly jerked out her leg.

"Well, that must really give you a scare, moving like that!" and they



expressed their fears for the bed frame. Then, in a singular, almost defiant manner, they gulped down a glass of cassis and left, saying that these Parisian illnesses really were odd!

"Whatever does she have, I ask you, to jump about like that?" questioned Norine, once they had left.

"Rich people have things like that! Then, well, you know, this château doesn't bring any luck when you live here. The proof of it is that the marquis died here."

"And then when there was a full moon, his wife talked and talked. She'd lost her mind."

"I say," continued Uncle Antoine, "Jacques is complaining that the barrel hasn't arrived. In the meantime, have you notched off the liters of wine we've lent them by the fireplace?"

The old woman shook her head.

"Ah, indeed!" she said, "More than half the barrel they'll be giving over to us." Then, after a pause: "Listen!"

"What's wrong now?"

"You did tell Bénoni when he arrives in Bray not to bring the barrel to the castle but to bring it to us, didn't you?"

"Yes," and they both smiled, thinking about the fruitful scheme they were preparing: drawing wine from the barrel and squeezing as many liters as they could into the cellar, then making up the Parisians' share by diluting the liquid with great bowlfuls of water.

## CHAPTER VII

One morning, Jacques saw Uncle Antoine making his way through the garden dressed in a long, dark-blue smock, shining as if it were varnished, embroidered with white arabesques forming an epaulet on either side of the collar. A rough soaping had lightened the raw skin on his cheeks on which toothbrush whiskers prickled, laid flat by a last wipe of a cloth downward toward his mouth.

"Where am I going, my dear boy? Well I'm going for a shave, because today's Sunday."

"Ah!" said Jacques, who had completely lost all sense of time since he had moved to Lourps. "Say, don't you celebrate mass there?" and he pointed above the orchard wall to the old church.

"They probably say mass for the women of Longueville."

"But don't you go?"

"What good would that do *me*? Mass is the priest's job, isn't it? That man, he prays for everybody, that's all he's got to do!"



"And Norine?"

"She's gone to grass on La Renardière mount." And after a pause, he added: "There's another one, look, Nephew, look at all the wasps there are! It's a good sign. That proves that this year there'll be a lot of wine."

Chatting all the while, they had left the garden and found themselves high up, near the church, opposite the Fiery Path.

"See you later," cried old Antoine, who was going down the hill.

Jacques watched him go, then sat down on the embankment and contemplated that same countryside he had glimpsed in the drizzle the day he had arrived at Lourps.

Let's see, he thought, recalling the names of the hills he heard Norine talk about incessantly There's the Tachy forest, far away in the distance, then Grateloup and the Froidsculs Mound. Here where I'm sitting are the slopes of La Renardière and La Graffignes, and down there, at the bottom of this cirque bordered with woods, the little red-and-white village of Jutigny, with its whitewashed walls and tiled roofs, then, almost right behind me, the black-and-green landscape of Longueville, with its peat bogs and trees. Finally, crossing the plowed fields of the cirque like a band of chalk, the monotonous, flat road leading to Bray.

He looked up and probed the horizon.

High above Tachy, the sky was drizzling as if with barely visible, pale blue iron filings, almost lilac like that dust sifted by the heated firmament in the morning, which takes on a darker shade in the afternoon. The trees that obscured the view stretched out in confused mouse-gray masses, attenuated by the mauve ash that trembled in the air. And gradually this ash dispersed, and the trunks appeared in a dark line, but the treetops still remained blurred, without even a tinge of green. Lower down, fields rose, one above the other, in terraces like carpets mottled with dead leaves, speckled with rust, and interminable roads climbed, running right up to the fields, separating these squares of dyed wool like lines of washing.

Then, above the horizon, behind the formless tufts of the woods, a great white cloud rose up, growing as it went, then fraying and flying like steam from a train into the sky, which passed through infinite gradations from soft violet to rust, becoming bright blue in its flight over the valley.

And in the distance, one could glimpse villages on the hillsides, at the end of the ribbons of cloth, on the edge of the carpets, piles of houses whose roofs remained invisible, lost in the reverberating sky, but whose walls shone out with the blinding candor of raw whitewash. The mist cleared even more. The hillocks lightened and were gilded by a



sunbeam that struck a whole hamlet but spared the muted carpet of the fields and pushed back the taciturn color of the dry fallow lands.

In time, the wind rose, breaking the silence of the plain, sweeping away the bluish vapor veiling the hillsides.

Then the horizon hollowed deep notches in the treetops, whose green could now be seen. The large villages and paths, faint beforehand, became clearer and seemed now not to drift along the ground but to plant themselves firmly into the earth. The motionless, silent poplars with their tousled heads, their bald patches, their tight bunches of leaves, thin for the most part, grew larger and rolled in the wind with the sound of water in a lock. Then, once more, the firmament changed. The sun disappeared, abandoning the villages to shiver on the hillocks. Clouds hurried along, forming continents in these seas of sky whose blue appeared in the torn gulfs of their capes. And the holes became deeper in those alluvial deposits in the heavens, funnel-shaped rust-colored holes, through which filtered the muted light of a lantern, the light of twilight, which turned the countryside pale, somehow shredding the sad, warm shades, diluting them even more, accentuating instead the garish tones, which, left to themselves, proceeded raggedly over the valley.

The atmosphere was stifling. The wind brought with it oppressive furnace blasts and puffed up the shiny smock on Uncle Antoine, who could be seen in the distance, very small, swollen into a hunchback by the billowing smock, with smoking dust passing between his legs, at times enveloping his back.

Jacques, appalled by the blue cruelty of the August skies and delighted by the sadness of gray Novembers, remained indifferent to this haggling of the weather, which was alternately anxious or gay, and poured out neither sincere melancholy nor veritable joy. He went back and walked around the château gardens. He sat down on the ancient lawn, but this position irritated him. He stretched out on his stomach and, his mind empty, amused himself by picking flowers. There was not a single one among those he touched that a horticulturist would have tolerated in a garden, for these were the aftereffects of those plants that grow on the roadside, sickly beggar-like flowers, of which some, like wild chicory, were nevertheless charming with their pale, cornflower, sky-blue stars.

A few had pierced the crust of moss and lived alone. Others had joined into little groups and occupied minuscule districts in which their clan stood at ease.

Among these, Jacques recognized families of opium poppies, which swung their heads topped by flattened earl's crowns of a watery green-



ish gray with pink blotches. Then, separated by ants' moors, were stalks of balsam: he amused himself by kneading their leaves with his fingers, which he then smelled, savoring the variations in scent that first evaporated with its initial perfume, then with a distinct stench of oil, and, after all that, when the essence grew fainter, with the light, soft smell of its axil.

He turned around, decidedly incapable of staying in one place. He rose and smoked a cigarette as he walked down the paths. Amid this muddle of verdure, every day he discovered new shrubs and plants. This time, by the old ditches at the bottom of the garden near the palings, he noticed hedges of magnificent thistles and holly bushes, their leaves mottled with the metallic green of yellow tears like drops of liver sulfur. And the sight of these bushes stopped him, for, clawed and twisted like old iron arabesques, wreathed with downstrokes and hooks like the Gothic letters on ancient charters, they reminded him of certain German engravings from the end of the fifteenth century whose heraldic air stimulated his imagination.

The creaking of the winch in motion above the well dragged him from his reflections. He could see, through the holes between the leaves, Aunt Norine in clogs, furiously turning the handle.

"What were you saying, Nephew, that the well has dried up?" she cried, as soon as she caught sight of him. "Don't be afraid, come on, there's still enough water to drown bigger men than you in there. Here, look!" and with an iron grip, she drew up the enormous pail, full of cold, blue water, in which the vibrating pulley of the well shook.

And she explained to him how to go about it. You lowered the bucket carefully, but, once at the end of the rope, you had to let go of it with a jerk so that it submerged and did not float.

"Darn it!" exclaimed Jacques, annoyed by this lesson and a little vexed at his clumsiness, which the old woman highlighted, mockingly. He went back up to his room; the table was set.

"Oh, really, veal again!"

"What do you expect me to do? I can't really throw it all away!" and Louise revealed to him the butcher's procedures: you ordered a pound of meat from her and she sent three, declaring that you could take it or leave it, because otherwise it would be too small an amount to slaughter and sell her livestock. And to think that, for lack of another butcher, one had to accept these conditions for fear of starvation!

"So we're forced to eat the same meat for several days or throw it away, which is what we do, in fact. I say, this mess is going to end up costing us a lot!"



And he lost his temper when he learned that the purse was almost empty.

They were beginning to quarrel, when the noise of voices rang out on the stairs. Then they fell silent: she, clearing the table; he, reflecting on the new attempts his friend must be making in Paris to settle his invoices.

Old Antoine appeared, clean shaven, wearing a high hat, and Norine, her face almost washed, her hair wrapped in a scarf with large black checks.

"I'm taking you to Jutigny, Nephew," said Uncle Antoine. "Today we'll go to Parisot's to have a game and a drink."

"But I don't play."

"So what, you can watch! Well, well, I won't say no to that," he said to Louise, who was offering him a brandy.

"And have fun!" cried Aunt Norine, after they had clinked glasses; the two men rose and left.

"Parisot is a lad who does all right for himself," Uncle Antoine related on the way out. His inn is worth a bundle, and he pointed to a large two-storied building, right on the road from Longueville to Bray, at the beginning of the village.

They went through the door, above which hung a pine branch, into an indescribable hubbub. It seemed that all these laughing peasants packed together were arguing and about to come to blows. They cheered old Antoine, and some of them drew back to make room for him and Jacques.

"What'll you have?" asked Parisot, a big, robust fellow whose hairless head had something of the beadle and the simpleton about it.

"Give us some cassis and wine, my dear man, and some cold water," replied old Antoine.

While the old man studied his neighbor's game, his elbows on the table, Jacques glanced around the room. It was a large room, its walls painted sea green, with chocolate-brown dadoes and beading. Here and there were insurance posters and prospectuses for pasture, a copy of the Intoxication Law held up by sealing wax on its four corners, and the billiard rules in a frame and balls strung on a rod to keep score.

On the ceiling were a few schist lamps. All around the room were school benches and tables covered with scratched, threadbare oilcloths.

In the center was a solid billiard table with First Empire copperplating and, in one corner, a row of white cues with brown patterns.

A cloud of smoke filled the room; almost all the peasants had cigarettes in their mouths if they were young or seasoned sections of pipe if they were old.



Jacques contemplated them. Deep down they were all alike. The old men had dry mops of hair, enormous hairy ears with pierced lobes but no rings, sideburns near their temples, cloudy eyes, round, fat noses with protruding hair, a clean-shaven strip above, wine-colored lips, and hard chins which were continually stroked.

All in all, they looked like the second-rate actors who imitated them, with their toothless laughs, their walnut-stained complexions, and their humorless mumblings. Only their turgid hands, black at the joints, their crushed, cracked, and eternally dirty nails, the calluses and scabs on their palms, like hardened leather, the backs of their hands the color of onion skins, indicated that they genuinely worked on the land.

The young men looked like pimps and soldiers. They had short mustaches and closely cropped hair instead of side whiskers. If you looked at their heads alone, they looked as though they belonged in the army. From head to foot, under their high hats, in their great blue smocks that went right down to their ankles, open at the front, revealing a putty-colored waistcoat decorated with stippled buttons, seemingly cut from a sort of hard Italian cheese, in their gray trousers and their heeled embroidered slippers, they feigned the sins of the Parisian boulevards so well that you could hardly tell them apart, with their waddling gait and loosely clenched fists.

They clamored around the billiard table, crossing their cues like arms, jumping on each others' shoulders to make each other bend over, slapping their thighs, lighting matches on the seat of their pants, arguing like people about to cut each other's throat, bawling with their mouths right up against each other's faces as if they were about to eat their noses and poke their eyes out with gestures that ended in friendly thumps and great laughs.

The old men yelled just as loudly for their part, hitting their fists on the table every time they threw down a card or, stopping, pulled out one of the cards in their fan, then pushed it back, contracting the skin of their dewlap with a grimace.

"We don't have all day!" cried the others.

And, once the move was made, the recriminations began.

"You should've played a heart!" "No I shouldn't have!" "Yes, you should've." "Stupid fool, what would you have done if you were me, then? Since, I tell you, clubs are trumps!"

"Water!" "An absinthe for me!" "A Picon, Parisot!" and the inn-keeper, dragging his feet, would bring the glasses of drinks, while his son, a tall, lanky lad who could barely keep his eyes open, wandered around the room, carrying a water jug.



"Hey, over here, you dummy!" "Of course, of course, everyone's happier that way." "Well, they won't believe him." "I say he's a liar." "Really, well, she's still so young." "No, I go there on Sundays, but not during the week." "Well, indeed!"

Jacques was driven mad with all these interjections, with these snatches of gossip that reached him, interrupted by the sizzling of a grease pan in the next room, by the rolling of billiard balls whose cues, brandished behind the players' backs, risked blinding him.

He looked at Uncle Antoine. He was placidly sipping his mixture of cassis and wine and marking the score of the game on the table with a piece of chalk.

Jacques was beginning to feel immensely bored amid this din. The smell of old flannel waistcoats, filthy wood shavings and sawdust, the stench of stables and whiffs of sediment enveloped him at the same time as thousands of flies buzzed around him, all swooping together onto the sugar, sucking up the stains on the table, resting on his cheeks or preening themselves on the tip of his nose.

He shoed them away, but they soon returned, buzzing louder and more stubborn.

I'd really like to leave, he thought, but Uncle Antoine was beginning a game of piquet. He moved and Jacques found himself next to an old peasant with a narrow beard along his jawline, like some large ape. And he had to draw back, because this man with the airs of a school teacher and a complexion the color of liquorice, had a nose that was dripping like a coffee filter, running onto the table, onto his neighbors when he moved, everywhere.

"That's it!" cried Uncle Antoine, dealing the cards. He wetted his thumb each time; everybody did the same when they played.

Jacques ended up dozing off, when he heard some fragments of conversation whose meaning he tried to fathom. But one of the two peasants who was chatting was talking so fast and using so much jargon that he was impossible to follow. It was something about a Parisian woman, and Jacques wondered at first if they did not mean Louise. But they did not. They were recalling a scene that had occurred the Sunday before at this very inn, at Parisot's. The two peasants laughed until they wept, and Uncle Antoine, distracted from his game for a moment by the laughter, and filled in on the story by a phrase he heard, burst out laughing too.

How bored I am! How much better it would have been if I had stayed at Lourps, Jacques said to himself. He got up, knelt on the bench, and looked through the window.



It seemed as if all the women in the area were gathered on the road, and not a single one had any breasts! And how awful most of them were, rugged, rough-hewn, with tow-colored hair, withered by the age of twenty, dressed like sluts, with their hemmed blouses, their gray skirts, and their prison stockings, worn with slippers!

Damn it! What ugly women! thought Jacques. Even the girls were advanced for their age, had marked features, and seemed old. Holding each other's hands, in a group of six, they formed a circle and sang shrilly:

*I'm off to my aunt's  
For some chickens to buy,  
Fourpence each,  
Fourpence each,  
Some of them white and some of them black,  
Mademoiselle, won't you please turn your back!*

At this word, they turned around and, back to back, thrust out their backsides, uttering shrieks.

Jacques ended up taking an interest in these little female monkeys, who at least had slightly healthy lips and fresh eyes. Then others came running along, of whom a few were very young, almost pleasant in their striped aprons. And the circle got larger and started again, while, all alone and turning around on the spot in the center, an older girl was beginning a lament on the Massacre of the Innocents and the Virgin Mary:

*Mary, Mary, you must running  
For King Herod is a-coming  
To kill the children in their cribs  
Including those in our midst.*

And the circle sped up, flew around, lifting up the smallest girls by the arms, who were no longer touching the ground and whose hats, which had fallen down onto their backs, bobbed on the elastic around their necks.

In the cloud of dust they had kicked up, Jacques could no longer make out the little girl whose plaintive, droning song the round repeated in all types of voices:

*Mary went up stairs one night  
And dressed herself in blue and white  
Then put on her finest things  
And carried off her son into —*



It was all interrupted, the round and the circle. Slaps accompanied by shrill squeaks resounded. A peasantwoman was furiously slapping one of the little girls who had lost her shoe and had continued to jump around in stockinged feet.

"Well, Nephew," said Uncle Antoine, pulling at Jacques's sleeve, "it's time to go back to Lourps."

"I'm ready," replied the young man, delighted to be leaving the inn, and they departed.

On the way, he asked the old man to recount the story of the Parisian woman that had made the peasants laugh so much.

"Oh! It's nothing much!" said old Antoine. "It's a lady who sends her little one to a nurse in the area. Oh! She isn't a rich lady! She came with her other child, and as there's no room to stay at old Catherine's where the little one is, she rented a room at Parisot's."

"But on Sunday evening, the night of the village festival, she came back at nine o'clock to go to bed, and Parisot said he couldn't take her in because her room was the love room, the one the lads and girls use. This lady wanted to stay, because it was pitch-black and raining and she didn't know where to sleep, so he said to her: 'Well, there aren't any other rooms, but in that one, there are two beds, sleep there with your little one and the lads won't bother you, they'll go on the other bed with the girls.' And she made such a face that those who saw it still double over with laughter — in the end, she ended up going to old Catherine's, who was ill on top of it, and the lady spent the night in a chair."

"But I don't see what's so funny," said Jacques. "Throwing a woman and child out on the street when it's raining and night has fallen."

"Parisot has to take advantage of his room, though, since the others were taken by customers who had come for the celebrations. He couldn't give up profits from the wine just for one Parisian lady. It's just too bad for her that she was there. Anyway, she could have easily slept in that bed. The lads jostle about with their fillies, but they don't do no harm. They fool around, they're only having a good time! And they have a few drinks. Then they go out, and those who want to head off to the fields."

"But in that case," continued Jacques, "why isn't the village full of pregnant girls?"

"Oh, it is indeed, but they get married — so the crafty fellows try to make a baby with a girl with property," he pursued, winking after a pause.

"And is this the case all around here?"

"Of course it is, what do you expect?"

"Quite so," replied Jacques, a little taken aback by this story, which



summed up the country's hatred for Parisians, their pecuniary instincts, and their sexual customs.

On his return that evening, he recounted these things to Louise. He expected to see her protest against the innkeeper's cruel rapaciousness and impudent mocking. She felt sorry for the woman and pitied the child but shrugged her shoulders. "Anyone else would have acted like Parisot," she said. "Here money is everything, and anyway, you must remember that the evening of the village festival is the time of the year when the inn makes the most profit, and, indeed..."

"Oh!" said Jacques, who looked with surprise at his wife.

## CHAPTER VIII

The long-awaited barrel arrived one evening. Jacques got the news the next day from Aunt Norine who, constrained and almost shifty, informed him that Uncle Antoine was just finishing bottling the wine.

"My, my! He didn't waste any time," exclaimed Jacques.

"What else is he supposed to do, my dear boy? He's only done it for you, as you haven't any left, so you can have your share sooner. We'll leave yours in the barrel, and Antoine will bring it over to you as soon as possible."

Jacques and Louise wanted to taste the wine. They went to see Uncle Antoine, whom they found bustling about, muttering to himself, praising his excellent taste, telling them that this quality wine had come from Sens, and maintaining that it was well worth drinking.

Faced with these halting words and the old couple's embarrassment, Jacques immediately realized they were swindling him.

"Let's see," he said, turning the spigot, and he and his wife tasted the wine. It was a zealous local wine that at first recalled the taste of grapes, then left you, after swallowing, with a bouquet of rinsed-out cask.

He glanced at the bottles that had already been drawn, thinking that they were less diluted.

"There you are," cried Aunt Norine. "Sixty-two liters. That makes half of what we'll pay you, plus the twenty we lent you while you were waiting for Bénoni to bring his barrel. They're all there, as far as I can see. See, the rest is yours."

"Be that as it may, but this wine's like dishwater," said Louise. "Your friend Bénoni is a thief."

"Oh, oh, really!" exclaimed the old couple. They tried hard to convince their niece that the lightness of this wine was a sign of Bénoni's honesty, as he could have tricked them by adding to it, to make it fuller.



"Come on, it's fine," said Jacques. "But where are we going to put the barrel?"

"You'll see, young man," said the old man, who put it on a wheelbarrow, pushed it to the château, and unloaded it onto one of the stairs, supporting the overhanging part with a pile of stones placed on the lower steps.

"If you ask me — your uncle's an old swindler," Jacques said to his wife when they were alone.

She immediately became exasperated, reproaching her relatives for their hospitality, which consisted in lending out a room that did not even belong to them. And, for the first time, she poured out all her grievances, revealing that Norine gave potatoes and plums, but never peaches, because they could be sold in Provins every Saturday. "No, you don't invite people to stay if you want them to feed themselves at their own expense. And they're rich, very rich, I know," she concluded, enumerating the land they owned for five leagues around.

Jacques was surprised by the sudden bitterness of her reproaches.

"Let's not get carried away," he said. "It isn't worth it. There's just one thing that annoys me, and that is the clumsiness of those skinflints. If they had stolen a few liters, it wouldn't be any great loss, but they ruined those they left us by diluting them to cover up their fraud!"

"Norine can't take it with her to heaven," concluded his wife.

"Yes . . . but . . ." added Jacques, hesitating. "They've probably paid their Bénoni. Can we reimburse them at once?"

"Not now."

"Oh!"

"We can't, can we, since you don't have any money?"

"I'm waiting for a letter from Moran, who's looking after our interests."

"Oh! Moran!"

"What! He's a friend, and the only one who's remained true in this debacle, and you're pooh-poohing him!"

"Me! Whatever gave you that impression?"

"The scornful tone of your voice, of course!"

Louise shrugged her shoulders.

"Look, I'm going for a walk."

And, once outside, he reflected on the change his wife was undergoing, trying to work out what was happening to her.

There were three phases, he said to himself, reflecting on the subject. After the wedding she had been a nice girl, loving and devoted, thrifty but not penny-pinching — and healthy, too. Then, when the ner-



vous disorder started, she became improvident, wasteful, and almost humble. Now, she was self-interested and bitter. He thought again about the way she had received the story of the Parisian woman chased from the inn and the fury she had suddenly shown when she had found out about Norine and Antoine's scheming. In the past, she would have laughed about it.

It is true that today we are poor and she is right to defend our interests. But this thought was not very convincing. He felt something new and indefinable insinuating itself between them, a touch of defiance and resentment. She is ill, he cried, but this new thought did not reassure him at all. No, there was something in particular, a new spiritual phase. On the one hand, she was uncharacteristically impatient, and on the other, there was an attempt at willfulness, enveloped in vague reproaches, a sort of reaction against her role in the household, which up until then had been minor, a reaction that unavoidably implied a disdain for men and a certain vain self-confidence.

Not only are you abandoned by indifferent people and friends when you fall into poverty, he thought bitterly. You are abandoned even by those closest to you. Then he smiled, realizing the banality of this observation.

What to do? He thought: let well enough alone with my wife and treat the old people tactfully, otherwise my life will be impossible. And, in fact, he needed to act as a buffer from time to time to cushion the shocks.

A coldness developed between his wife and Norine and between Uncle Antoine and himself. The old ones were awkward, reserved, and continually reticent, forcing Jacques to draw closer to them so as not to break off relations completely.

Without wanting to and without even suspecting it, the peasants were drifting apart from their niece. At first, they behaved badly toward her and remained on the defensive, understanding quite well that the Parisians had not been totally fooled by the theft of the wine. Then some anxiety, almost repulsion, distanced them from Louise since they had seen her when she was ill and stamping her feet. They were on the verge of thinking she was possessed or mad, perhaps even fearing her illness was contagious and they would catch it. They also thought they should have been paid for the barrel immediately and were, in short, disappointed by the feasts and generosity they had counted on when they invited them. Finally, harvest had come and, for them, neither family, nor friends, nor anybody else existed anymore. They were entirely preoccupied with financial questions, haunted by anxieties about the weather and the barn.



They no longer paid any attention to the Parisians, whom they disdained as if they were good-for-nothings, and they no longer came to visit them. These circumstances helped deflect any quarrel. Weary of living alone, Jacques and Louise approached Norine and Antoine, visited with them; and the need the old people had to bemoan their lot and boast about their labor decided their welcome, which increased in warmth, for the dirty things one inflicts on people at first leads those who commit them to retreat, then to move in the opposite direction out of the desire for a palliative, to draw in their claws, intended no doubt, to lay future traps.

Jacques was happy that things had not changed for the worst, for, with his period of drowsiness and torpor caused by the fresh air over, he was now overwhelmed by boredom. Of course, he thought regretfully about his work, his books, his life in Paris, surroundings that stimulated his appetite and whose charms he exaggerated now that he no longer experienced them.

Then there was a heat wave. The weather, uncertain for several days, finally settled. Stripped of its clouds, the naked sky burned ferociously with a harsh blue and flooded the countryside with flames, making the plain desolate. The earth dried up, went yellow like fireclay, and the thirsting mounds cracked open. Under the dusty clumps of grass, the baked roads buckled.

Like most nervous people, Jacques suffered unspeakable tortures in this weather, which melts your brain, soaks your hands, and introduces sitz baths into your underwear. The horror of shirts riding up your back, soaking collars, damp flannel, trousers sticking to your knees, feet swelling in your boots, the exhausting effect of sweat pouring from your skin like a water cooler, forming beads in your hair, making your temples sticky, weighed down on him.

His appetite disappeared. Eating the never-ending supplies of meat poorly disguised with tasteless sauces made him feel sick. He ferreted in the vegetable garden, looking for herbs. There were none, neither chervil, nor thyme, nor burnet, nor bay leaves, nor even cloves of garlic, whose villainous odor nevertheless disgusted him. Nothing, other than a few shallots, but their burning, mineral taste repelled him. He stopped eating, and stomach upsets began.

He hung around indoors, seeking a little coolness, but in the darkness where he shut himself away, his melancholy became unbearable. He walked around, going into less enclosed places, but then the heat entered, hot air vents blew gusts at him, gusts that stank of damp floors and moldy rooms.



He waited for the abominable sun to set before going out, and the atmosphere still remained lined with a heavy haze.

As for Louise, she confined herself to her room, dozing limply on a chair, losing what little strength she had in the depressing atmosphere of the heat wave. She rarely came downstairs in the evening, despite Jacques's pleading for her to walk a little, just as far as Norine's, for distraction.

This distraction was, in any case, mediocre. She and old Antoine moaned unremittingly about the laborers they had hired, explaining that, for the harvest, they had taken on some Belgian sappers who go all over the north and east of France at this time, crying that it was ruinous, trying to pay and feed these people.

"It's a scourge!" Norine was saying. "They're all good-for-nothings, we have to do everything for them! We're in such a sorry state. Only people that don't harvest wouldn't know it!"

"But," said Jacques, "can't you cut the wheat yourselves?"

"Ah well! Ah, well! My dear boy, when the harvest's finished, there's the grape harvest. That will last at least three months."

And the old man ended up admitting that the Belgians, with their short-handled scythes and their hooks, were faster and worked better than all the men in the region combined.

"We don't know how to do it. We're the foremen. We work with the big scythe that's in the corner there, but it's slow work and with the wheat we planted, you could go on forever and you'd still lose!"

Weary of being alone one afternoon, Jacques left the château and walked along the hillsides of La Renardière in search of Uncle Antoine.

Everywhere, on the hilltops, down in the valleys, people were reaping, and, although they were far away, he could distinctly hear rustling noises, followed by the metallic clinking of the short-handled scythes cutting the wheat. The life of the countryside changed according to the hills. Near Tachy the harvest was over, the shocks piled up in heaps like beehives on the pale ground, spiked by the short straws of the spared feet of the stems, wagons were being driven along and loaded up with sheaves, and stacks were going up like enormous sand castles wrapped in straw. Toward La Renardière, they were only just beginning to reap, and you could see great hats, not a single head, hardly a glimpse of a back, and everywhere were bunches of buttocks moving on legs parted by a slow, swinging to-and-fro.

Jacques finally recognized Aunt Norine and Uncle Antoine bustling about near the men they had hired. They stopped when they saw him. Jacques was dazzled by the sun, sweating buckets, dumbfounded to see



that the Belgians were perfectly dry, cutting the wheat with one hand, laying it down on their hooks with the other.

They were tall, hearty fellows with yellow beards, grayish-brown complexions, and yellow eyelashes, false albinos covered with a patina by the fiery weather. They were wearing coarse, striped smocks, as thick and as rough as hair-shirts, and attached to their leather trouser belts and hanging on their stomachs were tin horns full of water and straw to dampen and stop the scythe's jolting the whetstone.

They did not breathe a word, and since they were reaping wheat that had been flattened by the rains, they were struggling, spitting on their hands, their scythes squeaking on the wheat, which fell with a long tearing sound.

"Hey! Fallen wheat is a real job!" sighed Uncle Antoine, and he added this remark that hardly pleased Jacques: "You've really worked up a sweat, Nephew, standing there doing nothing!"

What an oven! thought the young man, who sat down cross-legged and huddled up, trying to shelter his body in the circle of shade projected by the brim of his wide strawhat. And what a joke the golden wheat is! he mused, looking at the dirty orange-colored bales gathered in a pile in the distance. However much he searched, he could not succeed in finding anything great about this harvest image continually celebrated by the painters and poets. Under an imitable blue sky hairy men with their shirts undone, stinking of sweat cut the rusty-colored copses down to size. How mean this picture seemed compared with the scene of a factory or the belly of a steamer, illuminated by the fires of forges!

All in all, what was the trivial work in the fields compared to the horrible magnificence of machines, the sole beauty the modern world had managed to create? What was the sparse harvest, the easy laying of a benevolent soil, the painless birth of earth made fertile by the seed scattered by a brute's hand, in comparison with the conception from the forge copulated by man, those steel embryos born from the womb of furnaces, developing, growing, and uttering raucous groans, flying along the rails, erecting mountains, and shattering rocks!

The nourishing bread of machines, the hard anthracite, the dark oil, the whole black harvest reaped from the very bowels of the earth in the pitch darkness, was so much more harrowing, so much more grand.

And he reflected a little on their contempt for him, these whining peasants whose lenient life would have been an incomparable Eden for miners, mechanics, and all the workers in the cities! Not to mention the fact that, in the winter, peasants trail around and warm themselves while urban artisans freeze and slog away. Yes, go on, moan, he thought,



mentally addressing Uncle Antoine, who was moaning, both his hands on his stomach, sighing: "Soft wheat like this is really no joke!"

"Hey, what's the matter with you," he said, looking at Jacques, after a pause. "What's got into you?"

"I'm being bitten all over," cried the young man. There was a sudden invasion of atrocious itching that the scratching of his nails did not stop. He felt his body consumed by a low flame and, gradually, the fleeting pleasure of skin scratched until it bleeds was succeeded by a sharper burning sensation that irritated him so much that he felt like screaming, a tickling pain that was enough to drive anybody mad!

"It's harvest mites," laughed Aunt Norine. "They've come again, just since yesterday. Look," and she bent her head, pulled aside two folds of skin on her neck, between which Jacques could see, deep under the skin, a red speck the size of a millet seed.

"But it's nothing to worry about, they're just fleas, as you might say!" continued Uncle Antoine. "They'll be around until the rain comes."

Jacques envied the grainy leather of these people who hardly suffered while he was beginning to grit his teeth, attacking his skin.

To hell with the countryside! he said to himself. He left the harvesters. He needed to get undressed so that he could lacerate himself more easily. He started toward the château, but could not wait any longer or go any further. He got undressed behind a clump of trees, almost in tears, he was in so much pain. He scratched until he tore off layers of skin and could not sate the painful pleasure of pinching, scraping, tormenting himself, planing down his body, and, as soon as he had furrowed one area, an intolerable burning began again in another, in flames everywhere at once, interrupting him, forcing him to claw himself all over with both hands, returning to already-ripe and bleeding blisters.

He tidied up, more or less, went up to his room like a madman, and found Louise almost naked and in tears. Her irritation had grown so rapidly that her fingers were shaking, and between her rows of chattering teeth welled hiccups and groans.

He suddenly remembered the cure for prurigo: soft soap. He tore down the stairs four at a time, ran to Norine's, pushed open the badly fitting window, went in, and finally found some soap in a pot. On his return he rubbed his wife with it with all his might, in spite of her cries, then he coated himself furiously with the greasy soap. He felt as if thousands of pins were pricking his body, but these sharp darts, this honest pain, these exasperating, itching swarms were delicious to him compared to his equivocal passions and nomadic obsessions.

And Louise calmed down too, but the soft soap was not strong



enough to get rid of the harvest mites. They thought of dislodging them with needlepoints, extracting them from the burrows they were digging, but there were so many of them that this subcutaneous hunt became impossible. We need sulfur, Emmerich ointment, infusions of comfrey, Jacques thought desperately.

And Aunt Norine and Uncle Antoine contemplated them that evening, holding back their laughter, surprised that the Parisians had such soft skin.

"But what's the matter, I ask you?" cried the old lady to her niece. "The harvest mite's just like heat rash, it burns a bit!"

"Besides, it's good for the blood, it purges you," continued Uncle Antoine. "Look, Nephew, you kill them like you kill worms, by drinking rum," and he emptied the carafe to their health.

That night was terrible. Once in bed, the itching, which had eased a little that evening, began again. Harassed, in an overexcited state that made his fingers twitch, Jacques rose, feeling suffocated, while Louise was scratching the sheets and biting the pillows to prevent herself from screaming.

Then she finally collapsed and fell asleep. And Jacques in turn calmed down, away from the warmth of the bed. Sitting naked at his table, he mulled over his melancholy feelings and urged himself to return to Paris as quickly as possible, as soon as he received a little money. I've had enough of this place, he thought, including its mites! And he counted the days. His friend had finally tracked down a bank that had consented to accept his promissory notes. But there was a whole heap of papers to sign, a proxy to prepare, an agreement to leave a little sum as an entry into business, a never-ending mass of formalities. Let's say another two or three weeks, and anything could happen in Paris, but what a lot I'll have to spend! And it's obvious that the country is no good for Louise. She is constantly shut indoors and doesn't want to go out. Anyway, the darkness of this château is obviously having an effect on her.

And he himself, since the tedium of the country had become apparent, felt gripped again by that vague feeling of unease, by the confused troubles that had shaken him so violently as soon as he had arrived at Lourps.

This was a fact: once he had recovered from the weariness of traveling and become accustomed to his new life, the instinctive repulsion he had felt for the château had subsided. The nocturnal noises that filled this ruin, the fights of birds heard quite clearly in the dark rooms on the upper floors, the howling of the wind that swept through the corridors,



playing the harmonica through cracks in the tiles and blowing warning whistles under the doors — were no longer noticed by them. They slept, only waking from time to time to hear the poachers beating about in the woods and the cries of owls hooting just across the hall.

But it was only a feeling of irritation or anxiety with no precise fear, no real terror. He would go back to sleep, in fact indifferent to those perils, the threat of which no longer occurred to him.

Something else was happening. The doziness the fresh air poured on him had numbed the dream life that had, since his arrival at Lourps, so oddly increased. He now slept without disturbance. Here and there he felt himself still hovering on the edge of a dream, as he had done previously in Paris, but when he awoke, he did not remember anything of his wanderings in the lands of madness, or rather he only recalled unintelligible bits of his forays.

Boredom was beginning to break up this bestial serenity. Only yesterday, he had floated in his sleep amid incoherent and empty events. He only remembered that he dreamed, but could not reorder the outlines of the dream, dispersed since dawn. And now, tonight, irritated by the burning of his skin, annoyed by the pain, he was gripped by fear again, a mysterious, impulsive fear, a sort of waking dream, whose images passed so quickly as to be superimposed and mixed up, a fear whose relation to the torments of a dream seemed unmistakable. He now heard the château's forgotten noises with an absolute and intense clarity.

A prosaic soul and an inert mind — the most decisive causes of bravery, for a man's courage in the face of danger almost always stems from a certain coarseness of his nervous system whose plodding mechanism has lost its fine tuning — no longer existed for him. Oiled and wound up by boredom, the machinery in his brain started up again and his imagination, nourisher of nightmares and fears, carried him off immediately, suggesting exaggerations, increasing dangerous aspects, running in all directions across his nerves, whose delicate system oscillated at every jolt and discharged its energy. And he remained at his table, stirred by an inner storm, where the beginnings of unfinished thoughts came to the surface, together with the debris of ideas whose demolished structure resembled that of certain dreams.

As if woken by her husband's silence, Louise, her eyes wide open, sat up and burst into tears.

He tried to hold her hands, which were pressed against her face, and, when he looked at her eyes, through the fingers that he separated, he caught an ambivalent expression beneath her veil of tears, one of awful distress and one of scorn.



He released the fingers that were covering her face like the visor grille of a helmet and sat down at the foot of the bed.

A perfect lucidity suddenly enlightened him, swept away his vague anxieties and fears, monopolized his whole mind with the strength of this clear idea. He understood that, for the three years they had been married, neither of them knew the other.

Him, because, despite his research, he had never had the chance to sound out his wife in one of those moments in which the depths of the soul surge to the surface. Her, because she had never needed a protector in the placid environment of the town.

Jacques clearly understood them both, at that moment, and perceived the reciprocity of their low esteem. He was discovering in Louise a hereditary rural sourness, forgotten in Paris but nurtured by the return to the environment of her origins, hastened by her apprehension of imminent poverty. She suddenly found in her husband a nervous weakness, one of those fine spiritual weaknesses whose machinery at work is odious to women.

And far from his puerile fears and his hollow dreams, which were suddenly relegated to the back of his mind, Jacques thought with melancholy about that solitude that, like an iodide, caused the spots of their secret, spiritual illness to appear and made them visible and unforgettable to one another.

## CHAPTER IX

To the great disappointment of the peasants, who had been cursing since dawn, the weather changed. Almost without transition, the white hot sky cooled under the accumulated ashes of the clouds, and the rain fell slowly and imperturbably.

The rain, lethal to the harvest mites, which disappeared, helped restore Jacques's strength, sapped by the scorching heat; it was delicious to him, and his brain was able to set itself right again. However, after two days of indefatigable rain, unexpected difficulties occurred.

One morning, a thin peasant woman with a stiff hip and a sumptuous, populated belly, entered, declared she was the mother of the child from Savin who ran their errands, went on at great lengths about her daughter's delicate state of health, and ended up announcing that, if Madam would no longer give her forty sous a day, she would no longer send her child out in the rain to carry provisions to the château.

"But," observed Louise, "we pay you twice as much as we did in Paris for liqueurs, jam, cheeses, everything. It seems to me that, what



with this profit and the twenty sous we give to your daughter every morning, you ought to be satisfied."

The woman went on about the price of the shoes the child was wearing out, stuck out her pregnant belly, accused her husband of being a drunkard, and moaned in such a way that the harassed Parisians gave in.

Then the question of the bread arose. Just as Jacques had foreseen, water was seeping into the basket in which the baker from Ormes left the loaf at the edge of the property, and they had to chew on soggy bread, bite into a soft paste in which their knives rusted and went blunt.

Disgust for this gruel subdued Jacques, who forced himself to watch the time and go out in the mud and the rain showers to receive the bread from the baker's very hands and bring it back under his cloak, almost dry.

The well joined in, too, and the water went bad in the rain. It went from blue to yellow and came up muddy, dotted with little leaves and tadpoles, and they had to filter it through tea towels to make it more or less drinkable.

Finally, the château held up terribly. The rain came in everywhere, the rooms were dripping. Food kept in the wall cupboards went moldy and the smell of mud wafted on the wet stairs.

Jacques and Louise constantly felt a damp cloak on their backs and, in the evening, shivering, they got into a bed whose sheets seemed soaked.

They lit bundles of firewood and pine cones, but the chimney, which most certainly had been decapitated, hardly drew at all.

Life was unbearable in this icebox. Louise was in a bad way and she got up only to prepare the food, then she went back to bed. Jacques wandered, disorientated, through the rooms.

He had received a few books from his friend Moran, favorite books, heady and sharp. Yet an odd phenomenon occurred when he attempted to reread them. The phrases that had captivated him in Paris unraveled and frayed in the countryside. Taken from its normal environment, the heady literature went stale. The venison lost its color, lost the violet and green of its juices. The wild boar sections became tame and stank of lard. The ideas, after careful sorting, grated like wrong notes. The atmosphere at Lourps positively changed the points of view, blunted the mind's edges, and made any sense of refinement impossible. He could not reread Baudelaire and had to content himself with flipping through the out-of-date newspapers he received. And although he did not take any interest in them, he waited impatiently for them, always hoping, around midday, for the postman and some letters to arrive.



In his idleness, this fabulous drunk had a place. He made him talk while he licked plates clean and swallowed great gulps of wine. But this man's conversation hardly varied. He was always moaning about the length of his rounds and pleading poverty. Then he spouted the gossip he had gathered in Donnemarie or Savin, announcing the marriages of people Jacques did not know, confiding that the bride was with child, but the priest and the mayor had taken care of everything.

Jacques would finally yawn, and the postman, a little more drunk than when he arrived, left without stumbling, sloshing through the ruts and the puddles.

Then Jacques stayed for hours on end at the window to watch the rain. It was falling ceaselessly, drawing lines in the air with its threads, emptying its clear skeins diagonally, splashing on the doorsteps, ringing out against the windows, cracking on the zinc pipes, diluting the distant plain, melting the embankments, and ruining the roads.

The shell of the empty château sang in the downpour. Sometimes, long gurgles could even be heard in the stairs, whose steps formed a waterfall, or the sound of a marching army shook the slabs of the corridors into which the collapsing gutters poured masses of water.

The countryside was sinister. Under the low, gray sky, clouds like fire smoke fled hastily to burst over distant hillsides, whose scree-covered slopes dripped with streams of mud. At times, gusts of wind screeched past, shaking the woods opposite, surrounding the internal din of the château with the roaring of waves. Trees that were bent over bounced back, screaming under their chains of ivy, pulled taut like ropes, becoming ruffled and losing their leaves, which flew away like birds in full flight above the treetops.

It became impossible to step outside without sinking. Jacques fell into an awful depression, suddenly reaching the depths of his spleen. In this utter disarray, his wife was no help to him whatsoever. She even irritated him, for relations between them were now very reticent and reserved. Besides, Louise's silence exasperated him. Her way of looking at the paper when he received a letter from Paris, without paying attention to the news it brought, wounded him. By the way she acted, he sensed her perfect disdain for his clumsiness whenever he tried to be practical. It finally seemed to him that the moral change that had taken place in Louise was now having its repercussions on her face. Under the influence of this idea, he ended up seeing everything in a distorted manner and convincing himself that his wife's features were becoming peasantlike. Before, she had been pleasant, with her dark eyes, brown hair, slightly oversized mouth, and craggy face, rather crumpled and



cool. Now, it seemed to him that her lips had frayed, her nose had hardened, her complexion had become weathered, her eyes were full of cold water. By dint of staring at Aunt Norine and his wife, looking for similar traits and parities of gesture, one day he persuaded himself that they resembled one another. He saw in Norine his wife when she was old, and he was horrified.

Skillful at tormenting himself, he went back over his memories. He remembered Louise's family: her father, who had died shortly after the wedding, he had met briefly. He was a good man, who had retired from customs, and to whom one of his cousins (now also dead) had introduced him. Deep down in this straightforward and gently stubborn old man remained some vestiges of peasant blood, which reeked of their former lifestyle! And thousands of little details came back to him, such as his wife's reproaches when he used to bring back a trinket or expensive books.

Obsessed by a single idea, he compared this concern for the household that he used to admire with the now-ripe instincts of greed. Reasoning thus, endlessly ruminating over the same reflections in his solitude, he ended up distorting his thoughts and attributing enormous value to trivial facts.

I'm changing too, he thought one morning as he looked at himself in a little mirror. His skin was turning yellow, his eyes were becoming wrinkled, white hairs salted his beard. Without being very tall, he had always hunched a little, but now he stooped.

Although he was hardly enamored of himself, he was saddened to see himself looking so old at thirty. He felt it was all over for him and his wife, that they were empty to the core, their will faded, totally lacking in spirit.

Louise, for her part, was weary, ill, weak, alarmed by the incurable illness that sapped her strength. Weary from neglect, she no longer made the effort to think, except to become irritated at never seeing any money arrive. She could not understand the slow paperwork of banks, did not even suspect how difficult it was to obtain discounts, attributed this desperate situation that overwhelmed her to Moran's lack of goodwill. She no longer opened her mouth, not wanting to make this stay in the château odious through quarreling.

Fortunately, an animal came and worked its way into their lives to reunite them. It was Aunt Norine's cat, an ugly, lanky, badly fed but affectionate tomcat. This animal was wild at first but was quickly tamed. The arrival of the Parisians had been a godsend for it. It ate the leftovers of meat and soup, but only for a little while, for Aunt Norine kept the leftovers her niece gave her for the cat and devoured them herself.



Having realized what she was up to, the Parisians gave their scraps to the animal themselves as it followed them around, and, weary of hunger and blows, it settled down with them in the château.

They both spoiled it. The cat became an emollient subject of conversation, a link between them that did not risk going sour, and it cheered up the glacial solitude of the rooms with its frolics.

It slept next to Louise, occasionally taking her neck between its two paws and rubbing its head hard against her cheek out of friendship.

The rain persisted. Jacques walked through the building again. He returned to the marquise's bedroom, trying to evade his present ennui by going back a century, but it was enough for this desire to come to him for it to prove impossible. At any rate, the sensations he had experienced the first time he had entered this room did not recur. The smell of ether that had so speciously intoxicated him when he had opened the door had disappeared long ago. Gallant ideas could no longer be entertained in this hovel, whose decomposition was accelerating in the precocious rotting of a spoiled season. He closed the room, determined not to visit it again, and, weary of the other rooms, he resolved to explore the cellars.

He borrowed a lantern from Uncle Antoine, who uttered shrieks, declaring it was unlucky to go underneath the château. He energetically refused to follow Jacques, who was battling on his own against a door whose lock clanked each time it was shaken. He ended up demolishing it by banging against it with his shoulders and his feet, and found himself facing an endless staircase under a massive vaulted ceiling, hung with the torn, dark muslin veils of cobwebs. He descended the warm, dank spiral of steps and came out into a sort of porch with a pointed arch supported by columns whose grayish-yellow blocks, speckled with black dots, resembled those smooth, timeworn stones that lighten the austere masses of ancient portals. The great age of this château, whose foundations went back to the Gothic period, became clear as soon as he entered the cellars.

He wandered through long dungeons with enormous walls and arched ceilings spiked with iron artichokes and large hooks. He wondered what these instruments that tore at the air were used for, and he looked with astonishment at the surprising thickness of the walls in which appeared, from time to time, at the end of a niche at least two meters deep, loopholes like the letter *I*.

All the cellars were identical, joined together by empty, doorless archways. But, he thought, there are some missing. And, in fact, given the château surface area, this row of rooms hardly took up the ground



underneath one of the wings. On the other hand, when he struck the ground it sounded hollow. Everything was blocked up. He looked for places for communicating corridors, but the walls were uniformly somber and the ground seemed to be of soot and earth. Anyway, the lantern did not shed enough light for him to be able to examine the way the rubble stones were joined together and to verify the surface of the stones.

When all was said and done, he thought he was going to discover immense corridors, underground passages that went on forever, but everything was blocked.

"But, Nephew, of course there are passages under the ground, and they're well-known throughout the region. I reckon they go as far as Séville, the village that's a stone's throw from Savin. They say they go under the church, too. Oh, it's been blocked up for so many year's now, you don't know."

"What if we unblocked them?" proposed Jacques.

"What? Are you mad, my man? Why would you want to do that, if you don't mind me asking?"

"You might find buried treasure underneath the slabs," continued Jacques, seriously.

"Oh dear, dear!" and old Antoine scratched his head. "There could well be some, indeed. I've had the same idea from time to time. But, first of all, the owner wouldn't like it. And then, neither myself nor anyone else in this area would be stupid enough to go down there. No, there's burning air inside that would stifle you," he continued, after a pause, as if to lend authority to his opinion.

Several times, Jacques returned to the attack, hoping to persuade the old man to dig some openings, for, if there were no treasures, which he hardly believed, the young man was hoping to dig up some curious remains. It would be an occupation, an interest in his barren life. But although Uncle Antoine was tempted by the prospect of treasure, he did not give in. His greed was vanquished by his fear, and he restricted himself to shaking his head and replying: No doubt, no doubt, refusing even to examine the entrance to the cellars.

Besides, he was laid up for a few days. He complained that his head was spinning. His niece advised him to see a doctor, but then he and Norine lifted their arms to the heavens: *I haven't got the money to eat their drugs!* he cried, and he made himself content with drinking the region's panacea, green mint tea.

This illness was real luck for Jacques, who could spend the day out of the château, visiting the old people. For hours he would calmly smoke cigarettes by the hearth.



Besides, the inside of this little cottage seemed less hostile than that of the château. He felt more at home, warmer, more sheltered, better clothed by these snug walls than in the great room at Lourps, whose high walls appeared to move further and further apart in order to better freeze everything around him.

The single room of this hut amused him anyway, with its old coppers, its antique andirons on which wriggled the red snakes of dried bundles of sticks, its two alcoves each fitted with a bunk, separated by a gigantic waxed walnut buffet, its florid cuckoo clock, its pink-and-green painted plates, its great, black cast-iron frying pans with handles whose loops were as long as a fiddle.

All these poor utensils had aged well; time had softened the harshness of their colors and married the warm brown of full walnut with the velvet soot black of the kettles and the cold, clear yellow of the bowls. Jacques took delight in examining these furnishings, scrutinizing the surprising engravings hanging above the chimneyhood on flat strips of brick-red wood.

Two in particular, a large and a small one, brightened him up. The small one depicted an episode from "The Seizure of the Tuileries, July 29, 1830," and it contained this touching story, printed in the margin below:

A student from the Ecole Polytechnique presented himself to the officer guarding the entrance to the Tuileries and demanded entrance. The latter riposted with a pistol shot, missing the student, who, pressing the point of his sword against the officer's chest, said: "Your life is mine, but I don't want to spill your blood, you are free." Then, carried away with gratefulness, the officer took off his cross and cried, putting it on the hero's chest: "Brave young man, you deserve this for your courage and your moderation." And the brave young man refused it, because he did not think he was yet worthy of it.

The print artist had been roused by this chivalrous theme. The officer was immense, wearing a shako on his head like a child's upside-down chamber pot and a jacket with red tails and white trousers. Behind him, smaller similarly dressed soldiers were open mouthed, their eyes filled with tears, watching the worthy conduct of this pint-sized, squinting, idiotic-looking student toward this great, wooden officer. And behind the hero, decked out in cocked hats and dressed in blue, the crowd was piling up, represented by two people, a middle-class gentleman, with a furry, tall, bell-shaped hat, and a member of the proletariat, topped by a pie-shaped cap, brandishing a tricolor above trees daubed in mushy peas, stuck onto a police-blue sky decorated with wine-vomit clouds.



The other engraving, equally colorful, was less martial but more useful. Recently produced, it was titled "The Doctor in the Home." This engraving, whose printed frame contained some recipes for liniments and medicinal teas, was divided into a series of little pictures relating the accidents and ailments of people wearing the pantaloons with stirrups and flaps, pale-blue outfits, goiter ties, whiskers and quiffs from the time of Louis-Philippe, in a piteous litany, all grimacing, one below the other, presenting the painful spectacle of those who have fishbones stuck in their throats, splinters in their hands, lice in their ears, foreign bodies in their eyes, and soft corns on their toes.

"They're a couple of paintings old Parisot gave us for our wedding," said the old man to Jacques, who had climbed on to a chair to examine the works of art more closely.

And the days dripped away, with him warming his toes and chatting with Uncle Antoine. Jacques questioned him about the château, but old Antoine was muddled with his explanations and did not seem to know anything anyway.

The château had belonged to noblemen in times past. The region recalled a family from Saint Phal, who also owned a château in the neighborhood, at Saint Loup. They were buried by the church, but the tombs had been neglected and their descendants, if they still existed, had never reappeared in the region. For eighty years the château had been progressively dismembered, its land bought by farmers and the building sold just as it was to Parisians who never made up their minds to restore it and ended up by trying to resell it. Because of its dilapidation and lack of water, nobody would consent to buy it now. The last reserve price of 20,000 francs at a candle auction had not even been reached.

Or old Antoine talked about the 1870 war, telling of the brotherly relations between the farmers and the Prussians. "Indeed, Nephew, they were really nice, those lads I put up. Never a harsh word, and men with real courage! When they had to march on Paris, they were weeping, saying: 'Uncle Antoine, we're kaput! Kaput!' And then, there was no one like them to look after the livestock!"

"So you didn't suffer in the invasion?" asked Jacques.

"Of course not. The Prussians paid for what they took. The proof of it is that Parisot made a bundle during that time. There was a colonel we liked here, too. Every morning he would gather the regiment on the road and say: 'Is there anyone here who has anything to complain about with my soldiers?' And we would reply: 'I don't think so,' and shout at the top of our voices: 'Long live the Prussians!'"



Jacques let him continue, listened to him on certain days, and on others looked out of the window at the damp frolics of the animals in the rain. Uncle Antoine had just procured a gaggle of geese that went back and forth across the farmyard looking solemn and stupid. They stopped by the house, the gander at the front, and clucked with an idiotic, satisfied laugh, drank from a barrel stuck in the ground, and looked up all together, as if they wanted to tip the water out, then, suddenly, without any reason, stood upright, flapped their wings, and made straight for the stable, uttering dreadful cries.

At other times, Aunt Norine would come back during the day, and when her niece, who was a little imposing to her, was not there, she started up saucy conversations that made her clear, watery eyes boil. Stupefied, Jacques learned that Uncle Antoine acted like a hero and paladin every evening and was dismayed when the old lady said, with a scatterbrained, contrite air: "You're really good, eh, my man?"

Jacques felt the pale, carnal instincts, which awoke in him from time to time, fading. He even became filled with an immense disgust for those ridiculous shudders which he could no longer picture without the abominable image suddenly surging up of these two old people fumbling about in their nightcaps, and finally going to sleep, sated in their filth.

Anyway, he was beginning to tire of the cottage, of the old people, of their exploits and their geese, when Uncle Antoine, back on his feet again, returned to the fields. Then he began his walks through the château again and reached such a pitch of stupor that, to occupy himself, he checked all the bunches of keys hanging in a cupboard and tried them in the locks of all the cupboards and doors. Then, when his interest in this futile task had waned, he resorted to playing hide-and-seek in the corridors with the cat, but this creature, which had at first amused itself by charging about and lying in wait, was wearying now. Besides, it seemed ill, with its right ear lying flat, tilted like a policeman's cap, pleading with its eyes and mewling. Finally it stopped running and jumping about. Unsteady on its paws, it seemed to be suffering from rheumatism in its hindquarters.

Louise would pick it up, massage it, and cover it with caresses, for she had become attached to this cat, which followed her and her husband around like a little dog.

She talked about taking it to Paris, away from the dampness of the countryside, and, in all sincerity, she became indignant at Jacques, who complained that this animal was so exorbitantly ugly.

The fact is that this cat, as thin as a rake, had a long head with a fish face, and, to top it all, black lips. It had an ashen coat streaked with rust,



a ruffraff coat with drab, dry fur. Its bald tail looked like a piece of string with a little tassel on the end and the skin on its belly, which had doubtless become detached in a fall, hung like a dewlap with its grubby hair sweeping the ground.

If it were not for its great tender eyes, in whose green waters golden flecks were forever swimming, it would have been, underneath its poor, baggy skin, the lowly son of an alley cat, a shameful cat.

It's deadly in here, thought Jacques, when the creature refused to play. And how badly off we are! Not even a sofa to sit on! It's impossible to find any dry tobacco to smoke, just like it is at the seaside — and to not even feel like reading!

Although he went to bed at nine o'clock, the evening was interminable. He bought some cards in Jutigny and forced himself to take an interest in bezique, but he and his wife became disheartened after two rounds.

One evening, however, he felt in a better mood, more at ease. The wind was blowing enough to lift up the château, whose corridors were thundering as if they were being bombarded and whistled at times like flutes. It was pitch-black. Jacques stuffed the fireplace with pinecones and twigs, and in the cheerful flames that blossomed into bunches of pink and blue tulips among the sparse black lilies on the old iron plate at the back of the hearth, he drank a glass of rum and rolled some cigarettes, which he spread out to dry.

Louise was in bed, stroking the cat, which was stretched out on her chest. Jacques, sitting with his elbows on the table, was dozing, looking vacantly into space. He roused himself, pushed together the two tall candles that lit the room along with the fire, and began to flip through a few magazines that his friend Moran had sent him from Paris that very morning.

One article attracted his attention and drew him into long daydreams. What a beautiful thing science is! he thought. Now Professor Selmi of Bologna has discovered in rotting corpses an alkaloid called ptomaine, which has a colorless oily state and spreads a lingering, tenacious smell of hawthorn, musk, seringa, orange blossom, or rose.

They are the only fragrances they have been able to find up until now in the juices of an organism in the state of decomposition, but others will no doubt appear. In the meantime, to satisfy the postulations of a practical society that, in Ivry, buries destitute people by machine and makes use of everything (residual liquids, sewage, guts from decaying carcasses, and old bones), one could convert the cemeteries into factories that would prepare, for rich families, on order, concentrated extracts of their ancestors, essence of children, bouquets of father.



These would be what you could call, in commercial terms, quality products. But for the needs of the working classes, which must not be neglected, powerful laboratories would be adjoined to these luxury dispensaries, in which one could manufacture perfumes wholesale. It would in fact be possible to distill them from the remains of communal graves which nobody claimed. It would be the art of perfumery established on new bases, within everybody's reach, it would be a product for peddlers to sell, perfumery for general stores at very reasonable prices, since the raw materials would be abundant and would only cost, so to speak, the price of the workforce of grave diggers and chemists.

Ah! I know some common women who would be happy to buy entire bottles of pomades and big blocks of soap for a few pennies, perfumed with the proletariat!

Then what an incessant refueling of memories, what eternally fresh reminiscences you could obtain from these sublime emanations of the dead! At present, when a lover dies, the other can only keep his photograph and visit his grave on All Saints' Day. Thanks to the invention of ptomaines, it will now be possible to keep the wife you adored at home, even in your pocket, in her volatile and spiritual form, to transmute your loved one into a flacon of salts, to condense her to a sugary state, to put her in an embroidered bag as a powder with a mournful epitaph, to breathe her on depressing days, to smell her on your handkerchief on joyous days.

In addition, as far as sexual pranks are concerned, we would perhaps finally be spared from hearing, at the crucial moment, the inevitable "call for mother" since mother could be there, resting in a disguised form in a beauty spot or mixed into some white makeup on the chest of her daughter as the latter is swooning, calling for help because she is so sure that she cannot come.

Then, with the help of progress, ptomaines, which are presently fearful toxins, will doubtless be ingested in the future without any danger. So, why not flavor certain dishes with their essence? Why not use this scented oil as one uses almond and cinnamon essences, vanilla and cloves to make the mixture of certain cakes taste exquisite? In terms of flavorings, a new method, both economical and cordial, would evolve for the pastry chef and confectioner.

In the end, august family ties, which these miserable times of disrespect loosen and undo, could certainly be reinforced and revived again through ptomaines. There would be, thanks to these substances, a sort of shivery, affectionate coming together, a sort of eternally lively and tender companionship. They would constantly create an appropriate



time to recall the lives of the dead and to cite them as an example to their children, whose greediness would preserve the perfect lucidity of their memory.

Thus, on the evening of All Souls' Day, in the little dining room furnished with a pale wooden sideboard with black wood casings, in the light of a table lamp dimmed by a lampshade, the family would sit down. Mother is a fine woman, Father, a cashier in a commercial firm or a bank, the child, still very young, recently liberated from whooping cough and impetigo, is subdued by the threat of no dessert, the brat has finally agreed not to tap his spoon in his soup and to eat his meat with a little bread.

He watches his contemplative and silent parents, not moving a muscle. The maid enters, bringing a ptomaine cream pudding. That morning, Mother had respectfully taken from the Empire mahogany writing desk decorated with a lock in the shape of a trefoil, the vial with a ground glass stopper containing the precious liquid extracted from the decomposed grandfather's viscera. With a dropper she had herself instilled a few drops of this perfume now flavoring the cream.

The child's eyes sparkle: but he must, while he is being served, listen to the praises of the old man who has perhaps handed down to him, together with certain facial features, this posthumous taste for rose, of which he is about to eat his fill.

"Ah! Grandfather Julian was a man of sober taste, a hard-working and wise man! He came to Paris in his clogs and he always saved money, even when he was only earning one hundred francs a month. He would never have lent anyone any money without interests and guarantees! He was no fool! Business before everything, a penny saved is a penny earned. And how rich people respected him! So he died, revered by his children, to whom he has left a gilt-edged investment, true values!"

"You remember Grandfather, my dear!"

"Yum, yum, Grandfather!" cries the brat, smearing ancestral cream all over his cheeks and nose.

"And do you remember your grandmother too, my sweetheart?"

The child thought about this. On the anniversary of the death of this fine lady, they prepare rice pudding that they flavor with the bodily essence of the dead woman, who, through a singular phenomenon, smelt of snuff when she was alive and who has given out a scent of orange blossom ever since she died.

"Scrumptious, yes, Grandma too!" cries the child.

"And which one do you like best, tell me, your grandma or your grandpa?"



Like all brats who prefer what they do not have to that which they can touch, the child dreams of the far-off pudding and admits that he prefers his grandmother. He nevertheless holds out his dish again for some more grandfather.

So that he does not get indigestion from filial love, the provident mother has the cream dessert taken away.

What a delicious and touching family scene! thought Jacques, rubbing his eyes. And he wondered, in his present state of mind, if he had not been dreaming, dozing off in front of the magazine whose scientific article related the discovery of ptomaines.

## CHAPTER X

He rose the next day, groping in the shadows, following the curve of a spiral staircase. Suddenly, in a jet of bluish light, he saw a very tall man standing there, wrapped in a greatcoat of green peculiar to Parmesan, dotted with beads for buttons, very tight around his waist, flaring out behind his back, forming a farthingale, filigreed with metallic braid, covered with red lead paint.

Above this funnel, low cut at the front, revealing two naked breasts with the nipples enclosed in thimbles, emerged an extensible neck, fluted like the bellows of an accordion, then a head encased in a blue steel slop pail, embellished with a plumed catafalque and held on by its handle, like a chin strap under the chin.

Gradually, when he had dispelled the darkness that filled his eyes, Jacques made out the face of this man. Under his forehead circled with pink by the pressure of the pail, two bristle brushes stuck out above his eyes widened by belladonna, separated by the fruitful, ripe boil of his nose, linked by a hairy channel to his ace-of-hearts mouth, which propped up the console of a chin, like that of a furniture mover, punctuated with a comma of red hair.

And a nervous tic agitated this monstrous, pale face, a tic that crumpled the inflamed, pointed nose, pulled up the eyes, gripped the lips with the same movement, tugging at the lower jaw and revealing a speckled Adam's apple, as well as some gooseflesh.

Jacques followed this man into an immense room, with clay walls, illuminated by semicircular windows almost at floor level. Very high up near the cornices ran pipes of green material, like acoustic pipes or the exaggerated tubes of an enormous irrigator. There was neither a rose-wood horn to blow in nor cannula to join up to it. Nothing. This apparatus just crossed the room with no apparent purpose. Below them



some very white, boiled calves' beads hung from figure-eight hooks, with their tongues all sticking out to the right. Then, attached to long nails, were pistachio chapkas with red currant tops and shakos without visors, like butter dishes.

In a corner on a cast-iron stove sang a clay pot whose lid bounced up and down, spitting little bubbles.

The man plunged his arm into the pocket of his overcoat and brought out a fistful of crystals that cried out as his hand crushed them, and, in a voice that was both guttural and cold, he said, staring at Jacques with his dilated pupils:

"I sow the earth's menses in this pot where vegetable venison, pea game, and beans boil together with a hare's giblets."

"Perfect," said Jacques, without flinching. "I've read the ancient books of the Cabala, and I know that the expression, the earth's menses, simply designates cooking salt."

Then the man bellowed and the receptacle covering his head fell off. On a pear-shaped scalp that totally filled the pail appeared a thick mass of vermilion hair like the manes embellishing trumpeters' helmets in certain cavalry regiments. Like a Buddha, he lifted an index finger in the air. Powerful rumblings ran through the green woolen snakes that stretched across the ceiling. Exalted tongues wandered in the withered mouths of the calves, imitating the screech of a wood plane in motion. A drumroll came from the butter-dish shakos, then everything fell silent.

Jacques went pale. Ah! It was clear now. An unknown edict, but one whose terms were formal, commanded him to place his watch in the hands of this man as acknowledgment of receipt, and this he had to do or undergo the pain of the slowest of tortures! He knew it — and he had left his watch at Lourps, hanging on the wall behind the bed! He opened his mouth to apologize, to ask for some more time, to plead for forgiveness. But he stood petrified, struck dumb, for this man's terrifying eyes had lit up like tram lights, burning like balls of saltpeter, finally bursting into the room like the headlights of a transatlantic liner.

He had but one goal, to take flight. He plunged down the stairs, found himself suddenly at the bottom of a well that was sealed at the top but illuminated along its shaft by folding wooden shutters, positioned like the slats of enormous venetian blinds.

Not a single sound, a diffuse light like the light of an eclipse, the dawn glow in October in the rain.

He looked around. On top of monstrous scaffolds, interlaced and intertwined beams surrounded a great bell in an inextricable cage. Ladders zigzagged among this maze of planks, stretched along a frame-



work of roof timbers, and suddenly plunged, broke up, and lost their rungs, stopping at platforms made of beams, then going back up, hanging unsupported in midair.

Without knowing how, Jacques had landed on a sort of poop, near some gigantic shutters which he thought must be louvers.

I'm in a bell tower, he thought. It plunged below him to a formidable, black tank in which phosphorescent stars swam like pasta, crescents, lozenges, and hearts, a whole subterranean sky with constellations of edible stars that scared him. He looked through the doors of the louvers. Who knows how far away, he saw the Place Saint Sulpice, deserted, with a shoe-shiner's box by the fountain. No one except a policeman, bald and without his cap, with a white tassel sitting erect like a leek on top of his head. Jacques thought of calling for help, asking for his protection. He leapt down and along a ladder to join him and entered a plowed tunnel, planted with pumpkins.

All of them were quivering, rising up feverishly, tugging at the stems that attached them to the ground. Jacques's first impression was that he was seeing a field of Mongolian buttocks, a garden of behinds belonging to the yellow race.

He examined the arched, deep grooves that plunged into these bright-orange, plump fleshed spheres. Then he was won over by shameful curiosity. He reached out his hand. But, as if cut in half by a provident greengrocer, the pumpkins opened up, and fell divided into slices, showing their entrails of white seeds arranged in bunches around the rotund yellow of their empty bellies.

Must I be so stupid? And, suddenly, for no apparent reason, he was filled with dismay, thinking of the trapped pieces of sky that were running under this room's stone ceiling. And he was gripped by immense pity for those shreds of firmament, which had doubtless been stolen and interned, probably for centuries, in this room. He approached a window to open it but heard the sound of footsteps and voices. They're looking for me, he thought. The noise came closer. He distinctly heard the rattle of cocked rifles and the heavy sound of their butts. He wanted to run away, but the door was creaking, hammered by a furious wind. Oh! They were there behind that door, just as he guessed they would be, without ever having seen them, demons who possess pubescent girls during the night, monsters seeking nubile craters, pale and mysterious incubi with cold sperm! Suddenly, he knew what abominable harem he had strayed into, for a phrase he had read long ago in the "*Disquisitionum Magicarum*" by the exorcist Del Rio came back to him, stubborn and clear: "*Demonnes exercent cum magicis sodomiam.*" With



magicians! Yes, this pumpkin field was surely a Sabbath of sorcerers crouching, sunk into the ground and struggling to exhume their heads and bodies! He drew back. No, he did not want to witness the disgusting effusions of this animated crop and these larvae at any cost! He took one more step backward, felt the ground give way beneath him, and found himself, dazed, standing in the tower beneath the bell.

The bell was swaying, but its clapper did not hit the metal at all and yet strange sounds could be heard, reverberated by the echoes in the tower.

He looked up and gaped.

An old woman dressed in a calash hat, a nankeen camisole covered with stains, and a blue apron on which bobbed the brass, heart-shaped plaque of a produce hawker was sitting on a beam with her legs dangling, and he caught sight of her enormous thighs under her lifted petticoats, carefully squeezed into tight elastic stockings.

On a dance master's pocket violin, with tears streaming down her face, she was playing the tune of "Oh! How You Hurt Me, Handsome Grenadier," while the Queen Amelia corkscrew curls hanging at her temples, jigged in time to the music, together with her large feet in choirboy, red fabric shoes.

Sitting upright in front of her, in a wooden bowl placed on a beam, was a legless cripple wearing a bedpan on his head like a white porcelain beret, and a child's pinafore of striped cotton fabric tied behind his back, leaving his arms free, which were covered from wrist to elbow in percaline oversleeves held on with thick soft blue elastic, just as butchers wear.

And this man was blowing so hard into a set of bagpipes that his eyes disappeared like tiny capers, behind the pink balloons of his cheeks with the name of a shop written across them both.

Jacques thought things over. He was in a bell tower, a completely natural situation, since, lacking bread, he had accepted the position of bell ringer in a church. These must be my helpers, he thought, contemplating the two bizarre creatures making a din up there in the rafters. But why is she crying like that? he went on, looking at the salty cataracts of tears that were streaming down the sorry face of the old woman. Perhaps she's been arguing with her husband, that legless cripple. This explanation satisfied him. Then he pounced on another idea. There can't be any water in this tower, so how can I live in here? As far as that goes, the old lady will probably agree to bring some pails up for a small fee, let's see. He tried to get to her, ventured onto a beam, but, scared by the void, he wavered, a lump in his throat, his forehead cov-



ered in sweat. He dared not go forward or retreat. His back bent, he got down on all fours and sat astride the beam, which he grasped frantically with both hands and shut his eyes, for his head was spinning. But fear made him open them again. The beam was slipping slowly from between his thighs, as if it were covered in soap. He saw it receding, he felt the end slipping from under his belly, he shrieked, waved his arms, and fell into the abyss.

Then, on the Rue Honoré-Chevalier, which he was pacing, he struck his forehead. Where's my cane? he thought. At this moment, this insignificant event took on enormous importance. He knew peremptorily that his life, his entire life, depended on that cane. He hesitated, panic stricken, retraced his steps, ran from one side of the street to the other, unable to string together two solid ideas: But I had it a moment ago! My God! My God! Where have I left it? Ah! Suddenly he was absolutely certain. His cane was behind that half-open gate, in a courtyard he had never even entered!

He went into a sort of cesspool. There was not a soul around, but the air was peopled with moving shadows, filled with invisible bodies. He realized that he was surrounded, he was being watched. What could he do? Now the courtyard was growing lighter, and the great wall at the end, up against a neighboring house, was being transformed into an immense wall of glass, behind which lapped a turbulent mass of water.

A sharp sound rang out, like that of those little ticket-stamping machines in railways or on buses. This sound came from the base of the illuminated wall. Jacques scrutinized the ground, when, at the level of the paving-stones, behind the glass partition, a head emerged from the water, a woman's head tipped-back, rising slowly and haltingly.

Then the neck emerged, then tiny breasts with erect nipples, then a whole firm torso, a little crumpled at the side, finally a raised leg, half hiding the quivering small, rounded belly, a smooth-skinned belly spared as yet from the ravages of childbirth.

The iron teeth of an enormous crane rose up with her, attached to her hip. These teeth were gnawing at her bleeding skin, and the turbulent water was dotted with red spots. Jacques sought the woman's face and saw it, its beauty solemn and tragic, haughty and tender. But almost simultaneously, an indescribable suffering, a resolutely silent torture, flashed over her pale face whose mouth revealed, with a languorous and cruel smile, an atrocious ecstasy.

He was moved, shaken to his very soul, and leapt to the rescue of this poor wretch. Then he suddenly heard two sharp sounds from behind the glass wall, like two marbles landing on a hard surface. And



the woman's eyes, her blue, staring eyes, had disappeared. In their place there simply remained two red hollows, which blazed like firebrands in the green water. And these eyes sprang up again, motionless, only to detach themselves, bouncing again like little balls, without the water deadening their sound. Alternately, crimson holes and blue eyeballs fell from the mournful and peaceful face into the lofty Seine at the bottom of a courtyard.

Ah! The succession of azure gazes and eye sockets drenched in blood was dreadful! He gasped for air before this creature, splendid while she remained intact, horrid as soon as her detached eyes fell. The horror of this beauty constantly interrupted was unspeakable, bordering on the most frightful ugliness, with its purple holes and its lips that, without even flinching, became hideous as soon as the equilibrium of the face was lost. Jacques had wanted to escape, but as soon as the eyes shone in their place, he wanted to rush to this woman, carry her away, rescue her from the invisible hands that were torturing her, and he stood there frantically while the woman rose and rose, supported by the jack digging into her hip and biting into her more and more deeply as she rose.

She finally reached the top of the wall and appeared, streaming with water, in the air, above the rooftops, in the darkness, like a drowned woman revealing her side punctured by boat hooks.

Jacques closed his eyes. Distressed groans, compassionate sobs, cries of pity suffocated him. An intense terror froze him to the marrow, buckling his legs.

In spite of himself, he looked and almost fainted, and fell backward.

The woman was now sitting on the edge of one of the towers of Saint Sulpice. But what a woman! A sordid trollop, laughing in a lewd and mocking manner, a rag wrapped her hair around the top of her head like a bunch of shallots, fiery hair on her forehead, watery eyes with great bags underneath them, a rootless nose squashed at the tip, a ruined mouth, toothless in front and with decaying teeth in the back, striped like a clown's with two dribbles of blood.

She could have been an army whore or an upholsterer, and she was laughing, tapping the tower with her heel, making eyes at the sky, holding out over the square the pouches of her sagging breasts, the half-open shutters of her paunch, the rough goatskins of her vast thighs between which blossomed the dried stuffing of a filthy seaweed mattress!

What is she? wondered Jacques, alarmed. Then, he pulled himself together, tried to reason, and succeeded in persuading himself that this tower was a well, a well that rose into the air instead of plunging into



the ground, but a well, all the same. A wooden pail with iron rings standing on the coping was testimony of this. Then everything was explained. This abominable whore was Truth.

How flabby she was! It was true that men had handed her down for so many centuries! In fact, what was so astonishing? Was Truth not the great Slut of the mind, the Harlot of the soul? In fact, God only knows whether, since Genesis, this woman didn't tramp around noisily with the first men to come along! Artists and popes, bandits and kings, everyone had possessed her and each had gained the assurance that he alone possessed her, supplying unanswerable arguments and irrefutable and decisive proof at the slightest doubt.

Supernatural for some, terrestrial for others, she indifferently sowed conviction among the lofty souls of Mesopotamia and the idiots of witty Sologne. She caressed each, according to his moods, his illusions, his peculiarities, his age, offering herself to his concupiscence of certitude, in all positions, on all sides, at will.

There's nothing more to be said, concluded Jacques, she's as false as a wooden coin.

"How stupid you are!" uttered a rasping voice. He turned around and saw an Urbanian coachman wrapped in a gray box coat with a triple collar, his whip hanging around his neck.

"You don't recognize her, then! Why, it's Mother Eustache's daughter!"

Jacques, surprised, did not reply. Although he looked patriarchal, this coachman screamed blasphemous words, then, as if he had gone insane, hopped and spat tomato sauce into a judge's cap, which he found lying on the ground, and deliberately rushed with his fists clenched and his sleeves rolled up at Jacques, who woke up with a start in his bed, exhausted, languishing and soaked in sweat.

## CHAPTER XI

Several nights followed, nights in which his soul, released from its miserable prison, flitted into the smoky catacombs of dream. Jacques's nightmares were sinister and distressing and left him when he awoke with a lugubrious impression that aggravated the melancholy of his thoughts, already weary of being turned over and over during his waking hours in the middle of the empty château. He had no precise memory of these excursions into the domains of horror, but a vague recollection of painful events pierced with alarming conjecture.

Jacques felt slightly feverish in the morning, the dizziness of a drunk



man stumbling through his memory, a general malaise, and an ache throughout his body. Once more, he worried about the causes that were splitting his life in two, making it incoherent at one moment and lucid the next. At a loss for explanations, thinking about one of Louise's momentary disgraces, he wondered whether Paracelsus's extraordinary sentence, "women's regular bleeding engenders phantoms," were not true. Then he smiled and shrugged his shoulders, vowing to abstain from liqueur, to wait until he had properly digested his food before going to bed, and to cover himself with fewer bedclothes, to have an undisturbed sleep, with more diffused and sweeter visions.

The weather being fine again, he forced himself to go for walks, visiting the surrounding villages, and at Savin he saw a little hamlet composed of two lanes bordered with shacks surrounded by dead hedges. He noted that these walks away from the château were devoid of interest. There were great dusty roads everywhere, planted here and there with kilometer markers and nut trees, frequently crossed in midair by telegraph wires and made bumpy every hundred paces by a pile of loose stones, and they all led, after more or less long walks, to similar towns inhabited by similar peasants.

One had to go several leagues to reach the woods. It was easier to wander on the grounds of Lourps and doze off under the shade of its pine trees.

Then he experienced a less predictable and fresher day. The priest had come to Lourps on Sunday and left the key to the church at Uncle Antoine's so he could give it to the locksmith to repair the hinges. Jacques borrowed it.

This key did not fit the church's main door, which opened near the château onto the road. He had to skirt around the gate and go into the graveyard surrounded by a fence, full of weeds and crosses of black wood and rusty cast iron. He looked for the sepulchers of those marquises old Antoine had talked about, but he did not succeed in finding them. Serpiginous ulcers of lichen and moss ate away at the tombs, whose hollow inscriptions had been filled up long ago. Perhaps it was under one of these stones that the abandoned remains of the Saint Phal family lay?

This graveyard looked fresh in the sunlight that fell on it. It was a riot of grass, a crush of branches in the midst of which bloomed, on stems armed with claws, the indolent buds of wild rose bushes. On this piece of land sheltered by the church, the air seemed warmer. Bumblebees hummed, doubled over on swinging flowers that bent under their weight. Butterflies flew sideways as if intoxicated by the wind, some



wild pigeons from the château passed by in full flight with a rustling sound.

Jacques regretted not coming across this little corner earlier, so placid and sweet it was. It seemed to him that only there could he come to terms with his suffering and cradle the insomnia of his mournful thoughts. One was so far away from everything here, so hidden, so alone! He followed, through the tall grasses, a wavering path that led to a door in the side of the church. With his key he opened it and entered a nave daubed with whitewash.

This church was very long, without a transept symbolizing the arms of a cross, formed simply by four walls along which slender columns arranged in clusters rose up to the arched vault. It was illuminated by rows of windows opposite one another, ogived windows with short lancets, but what a state they were in! The broken tips of the lancets had been patched up with cement and pieces of brick, the windows had been replaced by panes divided into false lozenges with lead paper or left as they were, empty, and the scratched vault was losing scabs of its plaster skin, sagging, strained, under the weight of the roof.

He found himself in an ancient Gothic chapel, demolished by time and mutilated by masons. Above the choir, a square beam, crossing the edifice from one casement to the other, supported an immense crucifix whose base was fastened to the beam with iron screws. The roughly hewn Christ, coated with a layer of pink paint, looked like a bandit smeared with thin blood. Badly attached to his cross, he pitched in the slightest draft, groaning on his loose nails. From head to foot, long trickles of bird droppings criss-crossed him, accumulating near the wound in his side, whose darker color formed a raised edge. Screech owls and crows entered the church freely through the holes in the windows and perched on this Christ figure and, flapping their wings, swung him about, inundating him with digested jets of ammonia and chalk! On the sanctuary floor, on the rotten wooden pews, on the very altar was a mass of white filth, the foul sewage of carnivorous birds!

Jacques approached the altar, whose barely planed planks could be seen underneath the linen, starched by guano and pissed on by showers of rain. It was topped by a tabernacle spangled, like the wrappers of biscuits from the poorhouse, with silver stars on a blue background, and there were candlesticks filled with false cardboard candles and vases with broken lips devoid of flowers.

The aroma of a decaying carcass incensed the altar. Following this smell, Jacques passed behind the tabernacle and saw, on the ground, the remains of field mice and house mice, headless carcasses, bits of tail,



clumps of fur, a screech owl's entire pantry lying there by a half-open pine wardrobe in which hung stoles and albs. He was curious enough to take a look at this wardrobe, and, below the coat rack, he discerned, lying in a jumble on a plank, a cornet of tacks, the chalice and the ciborium, and a half-open tin containing a few hosts.

Then he crossed the nave, and, at the back, near the great door, he saw on the baptismal font a fragment of newspaper containing salt and an old balm bottle with a few drops of water.

Ah! All the same, the priest who left the church in which he celebrated office in such a neglected state must have been a very singular priest! He should at least have put away his unleavened bread and vases, thought Jacques. It is true that God rarely visited this place, for the priest gobbled up the sacraments, rushed through the mass, hastily called on his Lord and dismissed him without delay as soon as he had arrived. It was both a telegraphic and a divine service, probably sufficient for the three or four people who had come from Longueville and who dared not sit down, the pews were so worm eaten and dirty!

Jacques was just about to leave when his eyes rested on the floor of the choir. Among the paving stones of unequal size, he noticed some regular slabs that looked like the horizontal tablets of a tomb. He knelt down and brushed them off, revealing inscriptions in Gothic letters, some completely worn, others still visible among the vague escutcheons and stretched-out figures with their feet and hands together.

He returned to the château, brought back a bowl of water and a rag, and, beneath the mud that he scrubbed, full letters appeared.

He deciphered one of these stones word for word:

"Here lyes Louys Le Gouz, squyre, in his lifetyme Lord of Loups in Brye and of Chimez in Thouz. The 21st day of December fifteene hundred and twenty-five. Pray for him."

On another, he read:

"Here lyes Charles of Champagne, knight, Baron of Lours, who died on the 2nd of February sixteene hundred and fifty-five, sonne of Robert of Champagne, knight, Lord of Séveille and Sainte Colombe, &c. R.I.P."

As for the others, probably more ancient still, they were so faint that he could not retrace their letters, despite all his efforts.

He was a little taken aback. Nobody in the area knew about these tombs, which were hardly trodden on Sundays by a negligent priest and his indifferent flock. Here he was walking over the old, forgotten suzerains in the ancient chapel at the château of Lourps. How far off all that was! The name had changed. Loups and Lours had wound up fusing, to be spelled Lourps. Ah! if only Uncle Antoine would allow the



château's cellars to be unsealed so that he could enter the church's crypt from the subterranean tunnels, perhaps they would discover some curious remains!

He left, and, hoping to encourage Aunt Norine to persuade her husband to let him carry out his excavations, he made his way toward the cottage.

But he was unable to broach the subject, for the old woman was grumbling, exasperated, poring over a calendar, listening for her cow's lowing.

"Is Uncle Antoine well?" asked Jacques.

"Indeed he is. He's in the cow shed. Here, listen! Can you hear him?"

You could, indeed, hear swearing and the crack of a whip.

"Goddamit, my lad!" said Norine. "Barrée hasn't taken! Three weeks have passed, I counted," and she added up the days with her finger on her almanac. "Si Belle is beginning to mount on her, and that's the sign. Ever since yesterday she's been moaning, so much so that she's stopped us from getting any shut-eye. Nothing's happened. We're gonna have to take her back to the bull."

And, answering Jacques questions, she explained that Barrée was a difficult cow to impregnate. They almost always had to go back to the bull, and that was tiresome because it made them unwelcome with the herdsman, who did not want his beast tired out.

"And 'cause you never put your hand down hard enough on her back just as the bull mounts her, it's her damned mule's spine that stops her from taking it," cried Uncle Antoine, appearing, furious, pulling on a rope the cow, whose head was bellowing and butting everything on all sides.

"Ah you, you think you're a real know-it-all, talkin' like that, my man! Since you're so clever, go to François's yourself and you put your hand on the cow to see."

The old man shrugged his shoulders: "Sure, I'll go," he said. "Take that, you filthy beast!" and he applied a solid blow with the whip handle to the animal's head, which snorted.

Jacques went with him. They walked slowly down Fiery Path.

"We're early," said Uncle. "The herdsman must be tending his cows in the pasture at this hour. It doesn't matter, at any rate we'll leave Barrée at his place as we go past, and then we'll come back for her."

They crossed the main road to Bray and arrived by an alley in the village of Jutigny. On every path they took there were hi's and hello's from old women and youngsters alike, doing the mending while looking out the chest-level windows. Filthy brats with their hair in their eyes sulked in the doorways, holding slices of half-eaten buttered bread.



They stopped by a brand-new cottage with a courtyard in front, in one corner of which waved blood-red hollyhocks, roses on sticks, as Uncle Antoine called them.

They lifted the latch of an openwork gate, tied Barrée to a post in the courtyard, then, closing the gate, they entered an elm-lined alley at the bend in the road.

They came out on an immense meadow. Jacques was surprised by this stretch of countryside, flat under a firmament whose curvature seemed to reach the earth at the horizon, down there in the distance, crowned with tufts of trees.

In the middle of this meadow ran a path bordered with willows of low trunks and bluish leaves, which rose like smoke as soon as the wind blew.

Proceeding, he noticed that between this close-knit willow hedge ran a minuscule river, the Voulzie, shimmering with blackish-brown circles formed by the capricious jumping of water spiders. The river celebrated by Hégésippe Moreau slithered around in silent, cool meanders, coiled up in places in deep-blue loops at the bottom of which wriggled, whirling round and round, the reflected foliage of the riverbanks, then it unwound and stretched out in a straight line, taking with it an entire airstream between its banks.

A sunbeam gilded the meadow's coat. The wind accelerated the passage of clouds in the distance which went lumpy like curdled milk, and it pushed them over the Voulzie, whose azure became spotted with white stains. The cool smell of grasses, a stale odor slightly spiced with ocher, emanated from this green earth stamped with brown marks by the hooves of cattle.

They passed over the Voulzie on a wooden bridge and then, behind the curtain of willows they had crossed, another part of the meadow stretched out, trampled all over by a herd of cows. There were cows of every shade and color, light tan and bay, white and red, black ones whose irregular spots resembled blots from an upset inkwell. Some, seen from the front, were dribbling and lowing, their horns like forks, their dewlaps high, looking with their bright eyes into the air, which reverberated in the day's bluish dust. Others, seen from behind, just showed, below the two hollows of the rump, a tail swinging like a pendulum in front of the swollen mass of their pink udders.

Scattered over the plain, they formed a sort of circumference around which wandered two wolfhounds with their tongues hanging out.

"There's Papillon and Ramoneau," said old Antoine, pointing at the two dogs. "The herdsman is there," and, indeed, they caught sight of him, looking down and tapping the squashed clods of earth with his stick.



"Well, François, everything's going well?"

He looked up with his clean-shaven, hard face, wiped his hand over his eagle's beak of a nose, and, in a drawling, mocking voice:

"Of course, of course, and indeed, old Antoine, I was thinking of coming to see you, unless you were coming to me for Barrée."

Uncle Antoine began to laugh.

"Hey, nothing gets by you now, does it? Oh! You're no idiot, my man, you see right away what it's all about."

The herdsman shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh well, that's it! All the same, I wouldn't shed a tear if she dropped dead, that damned cow of yours," he said. He got up, looked at the sun, and seizing the tin horn slung over his shoulder, he blew three long and sharp notes.

Immediately, the dogs drove the cows into one fluctuating mass. Then, separating into two rows, they walked off in single file in different directions.

"With his horn he warns the village that the cattle are coming home," said Uncle Antoine, and he added, seeing Jacques's astonishment at the indifference of François, who was taking no more notice of his animals. "Oh! They know the way to their cow shed, he doesn't need to lead them!"

"Here!" cried the herdsman to his dogs, which were growling and snarling, their teeth bared, as soon as they came near Jacques.

And they left. As soon as they got back, François went toward Barrée, who was lowing, untied her and kicked and punched her until she put her head through a sort of wooden guillotine near the cowshed.

The stunned cow stopped moving. Suddenly the door of the cow shed opened, and a wild massive bulk with a squat muzzle, a short neck, an enormous head, and short horns, slowly emerged, restrained by a cable wrapped around a winch.

A shudder ruffled the fur of the cow, whose eyes were bulging. The bull approached her, sniffed her, and looked up at the sky in a detached manner.

"Go on," shouted out François, who was coming out of the cow shed armed with a whip.

"Go on, up, up, up, boy!"

The bull remained calm.

"Look, are we gonna have it today?"

The bull sniffed, steady on his legs, letting two long balls dangle under its rump, which seemed to be attached to his belly by a great vein that ended in a clump of hair.

"Go on, up!" yelled Uncle Antoine.



Again, with his monotonous voice, François wheezed: "Up, up, up, boy!"

And the animal still did not move.

"Go on, you lazy good-for-nothing!" and the herdsman struck the bull with a great lash of his whip.

The bull lowered its head, lifted its feet one after the other, and scanned the farmyard indifferently.

Antoine approached Barrée and lifted up her tail. Without hurrying, the bull stepped forward, sniffed the cow's behind and gave it a quick lick, but still did not move.

Then François began to use his whip handle.

"Bastard, maverick, is stew all you're good for?" yelled Uncle Antoine joining in, hitting the animal with his cane with all his might.

And suddenly the bull got up heavily, and clumsily straddled the cow. Uncle Antoine let go of his cane and rushed on Barrée, whose back he flattened with his hands while from the tuft of hairs underneath the bull something red, crooked, thin, and long shot out, hitting the cow. That was it. Without a gasp, without a cry, without a spasm, the bull fell back on his legs and, pulled by his cable, returned to the cow shed, while Barrée, who had not even felt a jolt, who had not even breathed a sigh, looked around her, terrified, with bulging eyes.

"Is that all!" Jacques could not help exclaiming. The scene had not even lasted five minutes.

Uncle Antoine and the herdsman burst out laughing.

"Ah! Well, his bull is impotent!" said Jacques on his way back with Antoine.

"No, it's a good bull. François gives him too much fodder and not enough barley, but all the same, he's a fiery lad!"

"And is it the same every time you take a cow to the bull? Is it so organized and so short?"

"Of course, my lad. The bull wants it sooner or later, but it doesn't take longer than you saw, once it starts."

Jacques began to think that the epic grandeur of the bull was like the golden wheat, an old commonplace, an old romantic notion, patched up by today's rhymesters and novelists! No, really, there was nothing here to get carried away with, to wax poetic or sound the horn about! It was neither imposing nor haughty. As regards lyricism, the coupling was composed of a pile of two sorts of meat that they beat, that they piled one on top of the other, and that were taken away as soon as they had touched, and beaten again!

Without a word, they were now walking along the great Longueville



road, followed by the cow, which Uncle Antoine pulled behind him on a rope.

Suddenly, the old man coughed and began to complain about the difficulty he experienced earning money. After his usual lamentations, he coughed again and added: "If only those people who owe you hurried up and paid you back, we wouldn't have any problems being happy!"

When Jacques did not reply, he emphasized: "If I just had thirty francs back that would make me very happy!"

"You'll have them tomorrow, Uncle Antoine," said Jacques. "Your half of the barrel will be paid for, of that you can be certain."

"Of course, of course, but with the interest they would have given me in Provins if I had taken the money to them?"

"With interest."

"Good, good, you're a real gentleman!"

Jacques was ruminating to himself. The money is certain to arrive tomorrow. Moran had collected the sums owed me the day before yesterday. If he paid, as we arranged, the overdue amounts and reimbursed the most stubborn creditors, he must have been able to stop the threatened seizure. That should buy me some more time. There must be about 300 francs coming to me. I will have enough then, he concluded, to settle up here and take the Belfort Express with Louise in three or four days' time.

The idea that he was finally going to leave Lourps and return to Paris, to see his home again, his bathroom, his trinkets, his books, sent him into raptures. But would his leaving really silence the drone of melancholy thoughts and allow the dust to settle around his anguished soul, the cause of which he attributed to his wife's desertion? He felt he could not easily forgive Louise for distancing herself from him at a time when he needed to be close to her. Then there was the terrible question of living together. Up until then, they had lived freely, in separate rooms, with plenty of space. They had avoided the bother of ridiculous details, the shame of intimate ablutions. In the château they had had to stay together, go to bed and get up in the same room, and, absurd as it may seem, he now thought less of his wife and, on some days, felt embarrassed, almost disgusted, by contact with her body.

As soon as he returned to Paris, he would go and find some meager accommodation, but he could not really hope to have his own room as he had done in the past. This prospect of not being able to relax alone, when he wanted to rest, dismayed him. Besides, he knew that, if a man is not repelled by his wife's intimate tribulations, it is because carnal passion acts like a refractive lens that distorts the reality of things, de-



ludes men, and makes a woman's body the instrument for such excessive pleasures that her wretchedness is effaced.

With Louise, ill and weary, anxious and cold, desire was no longer possible. The original flaw of woman was all that was left, without any compensatory feature whatever.

"This stay in Lourps has really had some good consequences. It has mutually initiated us not only in the abomination of our souls but now our bodies!" he thought bitterly. Ah! How Louise disheartens me!

"Well, cat got your tongue, Nephew?" said Uncle Antoine.

Jacques looked up. He had reached the door of the château without even realizing it.

"Goodnight, Uncle Antoine. I'll see you tomorrow." He climbed the stairs and found his wife in tears.

"What's the matter?" And he learned that Aunt Norine had lost all restraint when her niece had asked her to lend her some sheets. She had refused, saying that she herself didn't change her sheets, and anyway theirs were brand new and that the Parisians might infect the linen. Then she had demanded the money for the barrel and talked about people who, while they aren't rich, waste food by giving it to the cat.

And she had wanted to take the creature back.

"He's only good for drowning in the pond!" she had cried and Louise had had to intervene between her and the cat, which had bared its claws and swiped them in the air. In short, she had become insolent and fierce, and in the presence of that pregnant woman from Savin, too, who had come with her daughter to bring the shopping, and had at first implored Louise to be the unborn child's godmother, but then had joined in with Aunt Norine to insult her, as soon as she learned that the lady to be swindled was not rich.

"I will not stand being humiliated like this by peasants," said Louise. "I want to leave."

Jacques had to reason with her. She finally calmed down but firmly declared that, as soon as the money arrived, she would take the train.

"So be it," said Jacques. "I've had enough of the hospitality of the château of Lourps, too, and anyway, leaving a day sooner or later doesn't matter."

"It's this poor kitty that worries me," continued Louise, stroking the cat, which was looking at her imploringly, stretching out its wretched paws. "I'm afraid they'll batter it to death as soon as we turn our backs. Let me take it with us, please?"

And Jacques approached the animal, which rose with difficulty and whined as soon as he touched it with his fingertips.



"Indeed," he said, "it's really been the only genuinely affectionate creature we've met here. And yet, thanks to Norine, who deprived this creature of the scraps we set aside for it for so long, we almost didn't even get to know it."

## CHAPTER XII

"Are you putting it out?"

"Yes," and Louise, lying on the front of the bed, leaned over to extinguish the candle.

"Nevermind," said Jacques, stretching out as best as he could in his narrow bed, "we'll soon be back on our lazy mattresses in Paris. I've really had enough of this misshapen sack with too many lumps in it and this bolster full of needles that prick the back of my neck every time I move!"

He had finally settled himself more or less comfortably in the space between the bed and the wall, when a cooing filled the room, a slow, quiet cooing that suddenly became clearer and burst into a clear and horribly distressed cry.

"It's the cat," said Louise. "My God! What's the matter with it?"

She relit the candle and they saw the animal lying on the ground, staring at the tiles. Cracks opened up in the matted tufts of its hardened fur. Its ears were flat against its head, its flanks were panting like a bellows.

Suddenly, it was choked by furious hiccups. It was as if it wanted to expel its entrails through its mouth, which it opened inordinately wide, letting its tongue hang out, its moist roughness grating on the ground. It was suffocating, its eyes bulging out of its head, then it managed to catch its breath, uttered a desperate howl, and streams of frothy water spurted out of his throat.

Having no strength left, it collapsed, its nose in its saliva, and stopped moving completely.

Louise leapt out of bed, trembling all over, and wanted to pick it up. But waves ran precipitately through its fur as soon as she even tried to touch it.

Eventually the cat regained consciousness, hesitated, looking left and right, tried to lift itself on its paws, finally stood up, its limbs trembling, and dragged itself around the room, crouching in the corners. But it could not stay still, running as if it were in danger, staring at the wall with a mournful, astounded look, then drawing back and stumbling, mewling with fright.



"Kitty, my little kitty!" Louise called softly. It recognized her and then moaned like a child and looked at her so sorrowfully that she burst into tears.

It wanted to get up onto her lap, but it could hardly climb and it gripped her skirts with its claws, dragging its already-lifeless hind-quarters behind it.

It whimpered with every effort, and she dared not help it because its body seemed like a keyboard of pain that resounded wherever it was touched.

Once it had settled on her lap, it tried to eke out a slight purr, but then it stopped and wanted to get down again. It slid clumsily off onto its paws, which spread out sideward, then remained immobile, its back arched, its tail puffed up, its ears flattened. Then it began to dash around the room again, the bellows of its sides heaving even more.

"He's going to have another attack," said Louise.

And, indeed, the hiccups and the vomiting started again. It sprang on itself, threw its head back, making a Herculean effort to thrust itself out of its skin, and fell on its belly again, the froth bubbling out of its mouth, while it stretched out stiffly, its mouth curled back and its fangs in the air.

"It really is ill," sighed Louise.

"Well, it isn't rheumatism as we thought. It's out-and-out palsy," said Jacques, who, leaning out of the bed, was examining the animal's upturned muzzle and the rigidity of its hindquarters.

Once more, the cat came to and got up. Its features returned to normal, its lips came down to cover its teeth, but a visible paleness bathed its face and the expression in its eyes was painful, so much did it reveal an interminable despair, atrocious suffering.

At the foot of the bed, Louise arranged a skirt on which it stretched out. It seemed absolutely exhausted, no energy left, almost lifeless. However, it pushed its claws out in front of it, extending and retracting them into its tensed paws, and it scrutinized the room with its black, glazed eyes.

Then there was a rattle in its throat, which contracted, and its eyes closed.

"The attack is over, it will fade away peacefully now," said Jacques. "Come back to bed or you'll be ill."

"If only I had some chloroform or something to put it to sleep, then I could put it out of its misery," said Louise.

They remained speechless with the light out, astonished that a wretched animal could suffer so.



"Can you hear him anymore?" said Jacques.

"Yes, I can. Listen!"

The cat had left the skirt and it was now forcing itself to climb up onto the chair so that it could reach the bed. Its hurried breathing and the sound of its claws scraping the wood could be heard. Then, everything went quiet, and after a momentary pause, it tenaciously continued on its way, heaving itself up with its paws alone, falling back down, beginning the climb again, with rattles cutting through its groans.

It reached the bed, wavered, regained its footing, and crept between Jacques and Louise.

Neither of them dared move anymore, for the slightest movement caused heartrending moans.

It came to sniff at them, still trying to purr, to communicate that it was happy to be near them, then, with a jolt it leapt up and over Louise, wanted to get down from the bed, tumbled, and rolled onto the floor with the cry of an animal having its throat slit.

"This time, that's it," said Jacques. They breathed a sigh of relief. In the light of a match, Louise saw the twisted creature, flaying the air with its claws, vomiting froth and gases.

Suddenly, terrified, she pulled her husband by the hand.

"Ah! Look, shooting pains!"

And, indeed, the cat was chaotically waving its paws in the air, currents running through its fur, making it ripple, while the cat's torso remained motionless.

In an altered voice, she added: "It has them, too, it's the palsy coming on!"

Jacques suddenly went cold.

"Of course not, how stupid you are!" and he sharply explained that this quivering at the level of the skin had nothing to do with the shooting pains she was talking about. "You have a nervous condition, nothing more. Good gracious, from there to locomotor ataxia is a long step! Anyway, there's the best proof. The cat feels the pains for one minute and the next it is dying. You've had them for months and yet you're still spry! Anyway, how stupid to want to establish similarities between animals' illnesses and women's ailments!"

But his voice quavered. In a flash, he saw the silent doctors, remembered their inscrutable expressions, their contrite and cautious looks. No! They knew nothing, no more than he did! Some said it was metritis, others, neurosis! They didn't know what it was! It was one of those nervous chloroses before which everybody, however knowledgeable, flounders!



He sensed that his explanations had been tactless, that his haste to dissuade her was almost an acknowledgment, that his pressing need to discuss it and to convince her clearly revealed the authenticity of his fears. He was annoyed at himself, then at the cat that had been the involuntary cause of this anguish. Oh! I hope it dies! he thought. Then he reflected that it really was not worth Louise upsetting herself by contemplating this creature's mortal agony.

"Look, it's late, we can't spend a sleepless night on behalf of this creature, especially if we're leaving tomorrow. It would be easier, I think, to wrap it up in the skirt and take it into the kitchen.

But he came up against the stubborn will of his wife, who became indignant and called him heartless.

He sank back underneath the covers, grumbling. He had only one desire now: that the cat should die. Basically, it isn't mine and we don't know it that well, he thought, to help justify the selfishness of his wishes. Ah! Anyway, we'll be on the express in a few hours. It really is time for this to be over!

The cat had stopped moving. Louise, on her knees, was looking at its eyes, its sad eyes stripped of their golden flecks, which were going blue as if frozen by great coldness.

She got back into bed, upset, and put out the candle. And in the silence of the room, each of them pretended to sleep in order to avoid speaking.

If only it were five o'clock, I would get up, thought Jacques. Goodness gracious! What a night! I'm afraid this will be an incurable blow for Louise. Yet, what if it were certain! What if the doctors had lied to me! What if her spasms were the premonitory symptoms of ataxia!

Immediately, he saw his wife's contorted features, her mouth open, spitting bubbles, and transferred the painful symptoms he had seen in the cat to Louise, seeing her as she would be in those moments, in a hallucination of atrocious clarity.

He was just about to shout out, to cry for help, when he came to, reasoned with himself; to divert the flow of his visions at all costs he resolved to count from one to a hundred so he could fall asleep. He put his arm out of the bed and uncovered his neck to catch cold and so go numb, and then, snuggling under the blanket, he would get warm. But, when he got to twenty, the counted numbers fell away by themselves, descending deeper until they no longer occupied his thoughts and he returned to the horror of his reflections.

That's enough, he thought, rebelling against them. He coughed slightly.



"Are you asleep?" He was addressing his wife, for he hoped now that the sound of his words would dissipate the waking nightmares that haunted him.

"No," she said in a muffled voice.

Then he chattered to himself, losing himself in futile digressions about the packing, making a list of the objects they needed to take with them, worrying about the capacity of their trunks, trying in some way to keep ahead of the night. But his lips were proffering mechanical sounds, working all by themselves, without being directed by his mind, which had nevertheless retraced its steps and rediscovered the track that these subterfuges had tried to lose.

Nevertheless, he finally fell silent and grew heavy. Even if he did not go to sleep entirely, he at least lost sight of his troubles.

Waking suddenly at dawn, the events of the night came back to him in a flash and he leapt out of bed.

What about the cat? He saw it, lying motionless and crumpled on the skirt, and called to it softly. The animal did not move a muscle, but waves immediately ran down its fur.

My wife is right, we ought to have the courage to finish it off, he thought. Pity crept into him, faced with the interminable mortal agonies of this creature.

He was anxious to escape this confounded room. What nights I have suffered there, he thought, the first one was horrible, the others were insane, the last was atrocious!

He went downstairs and took a walk in the garden. Gradually, while he walked, his hatred for Lourps and his desire to leave were weakened.

It was so pleasant out on the lawn, so warm behind the iron fence wrought in an intricate leaf pattern! Filtered by the pines, the breeze carried the faint smell of turpentine and rubber. The tannic odor of bark rose from the upturned moss on the ground and invigorated him as if he were breathing in the fumes of smelling salts. The château, revived by the sunlight and freed from its surly aspect, was rejuvenated and took on a festive and charming air just as he was leaving. Even those pigeons, so wild that you could not manage to touch them, were now strutting about in the courtyard and looking at him, not flying away as he approached. It was somehow a tender farewell from this abandoned place, where he had spent so many melancholy hours.

He felt a lump in his throat as he walked for the last time through the bower of deserted pathways, looking at the little bunches of grapes clustered in the pagodas of the old pine trees. It was over. That very evening he would return to Paris and his life would change!



As long as he had relegated his return to some undecided time in the future, he had also silenced the decision of how he would live. He would say to himself: I will wait and see, and proposed more or less certain expedients; he was not fooled by his own answers, but he lulled his worries, dismembered them, rendered them ineffectual, wearing them down with mock resolutions which he almost succeeded in believing, at least for the moment.

Now that his return was set, imminent, he lost all will and did not even attempt to go over his plans.

What was the use? He was entering the unknown. The only predictions he could reasonably make were these: that he must, as soon as he arrived, go out on business again, visiting some people, awaiting others, making contact again with those he despised, in order to procure himself some advantageous work or a position. What a series of snubs, what a succession of humiliations I will receive, he thought. Ah! Atone-ment for my utilitarian disdain awaits me!

How appealing solitude was! Here at least you did not have to see anybody, apart from those peasants! Yes, he would have to splash about in the crowded tub with the rest so that he could earn his daily bread!

And then, even if he admitted that he was getting used to the roughness of a life of poverty, what would become of Louise? He pictured her ill and powerless, imagined the abominable consequences of her ataxia, the special chairs, the waterproof cloths, the undersheets, the linen, all the horrors of an inert body to attend to. I will not even be able to keep her with me, since I will not have the means to pay a maid. So I shall have to put her in the poorhouse! The thought of this was so cruel that his tears flowed.

Yet it was futile to get so desperate in advance! Anyway, even if Louise did return to health, are the bonds between us not broken? We have offended each other too much here for the memory of our low esteem to fade! No, it's over. Whatever happens, the tranquillity of our lives is dead!

But, look, he continued, wiping his eyes, we have more pressing concerns. We're leaving in a few hours and the trunks need to be packed.

He went back upstairs, found his wife up, folding her dresses.

"Ah! If only I didn't have this cat, I would be really glad to go back to Paris. It has two hours to live at most. Look, its eyes have glazed over and it has a rattle in its throat."

He tidied his papers and got his things ready while his wife lit the fire for lunch.



Footsteps rang out suddenly on the stairs, and the postman entered.

"I've come earlier than usual," he said, "because I've got a good letter for you!" And he pulled out the long-awaited letter, with its five seals.

A sort of grandeur filled his bronzed face and his gray hair seemed almost venerable. The importance of this letter containing money transfigured him, ennobled the old drunkard even down to his toothless laugh.

He sat down, rubbed his head with his palm, looked at the barely begun preparations for the meal and the empty table. He clearly regretted having hurried so.

"It's the last letter you'll be bringing us, postman," Jacques uttered, signing the receipt. "We're leaving for Paris this very day."

The old man almost collapsed.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! And I was counting so much on my Parisians being here at least until winter, oh, really, indeed, this news wrenches my heart. It was quite a hike, too, but what difference does that make to me? I came here to see good, ordinary folks, didn't I? We were nearly friends. Ah, here! For the love of Mignot, my little lady, you'd better believe that you'll be missed," he went on in a plaintive tone that began to belie the distant deceitfulness in his eyes.

"Anyway, that isn't gonna stop us from drinking a last glass of wine to your health, is it?" and he cast a sidelong glance at the bottle.

Jacques was anxious to see him clear out.

"Here, old Mignot, here's ten francs for your trouble and now, to your health," and he offered him a glass.

With one hand, the postman pocketed the coins and with the other he threw the wine down his throat in one swing. Then he asked permission to slice a piece of bread, thinking, not without reason, that they could not let him eat like this, without a drink.

In this fashion, he gulped down almost the whole bottle, finally got up, stretched out his dirty paw, and tenderly declared that he would wait for them next year. Then, looking forlorn, he went away, jangling the two coins of a hundred sou in his trousers.

"Ah, do you really want there to be no letters in the area?" cried Uncle Antoine, who appeared a few moments after the postman had left.

"Why's that?"

"Why! Well, because he'll stop at the first inn and drink until he drops."

"That's funny, people not receiving any letters because the Parisians



have got the postman drunk. But, listen, we don't have any time to lose, because we're taking the 4:33 express. We'd be grateful if you'd settle our bills for us."

"The express! You're leaving! Good God, is it true? Just like that?"

"Yes, I received some news this morning that means I must be in Paris by around six o'clock."

"But Louise is staying, aren't you, my girl?" continued Uncle Antoine, looking out of the corner of his eye at the money lying on the table.

"No, I'm leaving too."

"Oh, dear, dear!"

"Look here," said Jacques. "How much do I owe you?"

Then the old man pulled a filthy piece of paper folded in quarters from his waistcoat.

"It's full of figures, Parisot calculated it for me with the interest that's due. Look, my lad, does that suit you?"

"Perfectly. Only, I haven't any change."

"That doesn't matter! I've got some coins here."

He got up and pulled a long purse from the pocket of his overalls.

The old man's thought of everything, knowing that I'd received some money, thought Jacques.

Uncle Antoine gave him the change, one coin at a time, keeping hold of each one with his fingers, grumbling. "It's good hard cash I'm giving you here," he said, having difficulty hiding an almost-mocking satisfaction, for he had just duped the Parisians again, counting the interest not from the day they had paid the shopkeeper but from the day he had ordered the barrel.

"Is that the right amount?"

"Yes, Uncle Antoine."

"But, my dear lad, if you're leaving, we'll have to hitch up the donkey."

"So, you're going to do me a favor?"

"Of course, of course, we can't let you leave like this. You must come and have a bite with us."

"The lunch I've made is ready," said Louise.

"Well, there you are! I'll take it along and we can eat together then."

Louise looked questioningly at her husband.

"So be it!" the latter said. "You're right, Uncle Antoine, the very least we can do before leaving is have a drink together."

Uncle Antoine insisted that he carry the basket in which the provisions were packed. He had thought that he might well have need of his niece in Paris, so that he could turn up at her house for free room and board when he went to settle his accounts at Candlemas.



"They're going!" he cried, as he got home.

Norine let the skillet fall from her hand.

"Well, indeed, indeed!" She forced out a tear. Then, fearing above all that she would be snubbed by her niece, whose scornful expression worried her, she stretched out her long, lean arms to Jacques and kissed him automatically on both cheeks.

"Oh dear! What shall we do? There's some news! And I was just saying that we must make them some flapjacks, you know, Nephew, pancakes tossed in the skillet, there's nothing more delicious! How sad this is! Ah! It's really time, they're going away!"

She muttered while she set the table: "It's going to seem empty here," and she sniveled as she rinsed the glasses.

"But how about coming back to see us next year?"

"Of course we will."

The meal was eaten in silence. Norine was whimpering, never looking up from her plate, the old man, embarrassed by the silence of Jacques and Louise, who were preoccupied and sad, just said: "Here, have another glass, my lad," as he filled the glasses, and he emptied his, smacking his lips and wiping them with the back of his hand.

"We must go," declared Louise. "I still have some things to pack at the château, and it will soon be time to catch the train."

"You'll take home a rabbit, won't you?"

Although they protested, they had to give in. Aunt Norine strangled one of her animals and brought it, still warm, rolled in straw.

"While Louise goes and looks around to see you haven't left anything, we'll have the time to have a glass of brandy, then we'll harness up," said Uncle Antoine.

They clinked glasses again and Jacques promised, when implored, to write to the old folk as soon as he returned to the capital, without having any intention to keep his promise.

At last, old Antoine pulled the ramshackle cart out of a barn, slipped his little donkey between the shafts, and they hobbled off to the château of Lourps.

"I've taken the cat up to the room. I left my skirt with it so it won't catch cold and some water to drink if it gets thirsty. I'd prefer that it die like that than to see it clubbed to death by Aunt Norine," said Louise. "It isn't suffering, and it didn't recognize me anyway, the poor kitty, it's all stiff!"

"Let's go, we're ready," cried Uncle Antoine, filling the cart with cases and trunks. "So, off we go!" and they jolted, thrown against each other, in that hard cart, whose wheels bounced over every stone.



Sitting in the back, on a pile of hay, Jacques examined these peasants whom he hoped never to see again.

That is consolation for leaving this miserable haven where I was almost safe, he thought, for, rascals as they are, I still prefer mixing with people that are sharper and more flexible.

"Hey, Nephew!"

"What is it, Aunt Norine?"

"If you and Louise have any clothes you don't use anymore, we could use them for our Sunday best here."

"There really is a shortage of good clothes here!" said Uncle Antoine.

Jacques, feeling exhausted, promised them everything they asked for.

"We'll think of you often!"

"Us too!"

"You are our flesh and blood, as you might say, my girl," continued Norine tearfully, looking at her niece.

"At last! Here's the station," murmured Jacques. Then, after the luggage was fetched, the peasants opened their arms wide and kissed Jacques and Louise heartily on both cheeks, with tears in their eyes.

When the Parisians had settled into their carriage, they whipped the donkey and, after a pause, old Antoine said:

"I could hear them all right. I heard her telling Jacques she had left a skirt for the dying cat."

"How stupid of them!"

"Indeed, she said it."

"Well, indeed!"

And, to stop the cat from ruining the fabric with its claws, they made their way back to the château at full speed.

Originally published as *En rade* (1886).







# **The Future Eve**

by Villiers de l'Isle Adam

---

**Translated by Robert Martin Adams**

**Introduction**  
**by Asti Hustvedt**



# Science Fictions: The Future Eves of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Jean-Martin Charcot

by Asti Hustvedt

Near the end of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's life, a group of young poets named him the father of symbolism, a designation that both surprised and amused him since he never adhered to any particular literary movement.<sup>1</sup> The man himself, however, was in many ways a perfect embodiment of the decadent hero. Born in 1838 into a family of fallen nobility, complete with a degenerate father who squandered the modest remains of the family fortune, Villiers was known in the Parisian literary world as an eccentric genius, an aristocratic dandy in tattered clothing. Stéphane Mallarmé, J.-K. Huysmans, Remy de Gourmont, and Catulle Mendès were among his closest friends and supporters. Yet, in spite of the respect he had from his contemporaries, as well as from his precursors — Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Hugo all admired his work — he was never fully accepted by the public and lived most of his life in abject poverty, writing in cold unfurnished rooms on scraps of paper with watered-down ink. He was a man profoundly at odds with his era, which he detested for its materialism and its blind faith in science. Villiers is best known for his play *Axël*, in which the heroes reject the real world in favor of an ideal inner world, and for his short stories, many of them strident satires of the bourgeoisie, while *The Future Eve*, his only completed novel, has spent much of the last century in relative obscurity. From the beginning, when it was first serialized in 1880 as *L'Eve nouvelle* in *Le Gaulois*, one of the big Parisian dailies, it met with bewilderment: the paper abruptly suspended publication after only fourteen installments. Although *L'Etoile française* picked it up a few months later, that paper, too, stopped the serial before the novel's end, but this time with only three chapters to go. While no explanation was given in either case, it is likely that the papers' readers, accustomed to undemanding adventures and romances, had complained, and the editors, unwilling to lose subscribers, replaced Villiers's strange work with something more palatable.<sup>2</sup> When the novel was published in book form in 1886, it was met with virtual silence: only



three critics, two of them friends of the author, even bothered to mention the book.<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, *The Future Eve*, a novel about Thomas Edison's fantastic invention of an artificial woman, is a strange and difficult book. Unlike the somber *Axël* and the satirical short stories, its tone resists categorization. It is at once a farce and deadly serious, a paradox that appears before one even begins the story: it is dedicated "To the Dreamers, To the Deriders." It is also a particularly dense text, filled with references to science, literature, philosophy, mythology, opera, the Bible, and the occult. Critics have called it, among other things, symbolist, Hegelian, Faustian, fantastic, metaphysical, a ghost story, and a science fiction. My reading, while recognizing the often paradoxical coexistence of all these different views, focuses on *The Future Eve's* decadence, a decadence that expresses itself in the female body through the denigration of the natural and idealization of the artificial. This reading led me to the scientific underpinnings, specifically the discourse on hysteria, that inform the novel. I began my research by poring over medical documents from the period — a context for Villiers's text. However, the further I read, the more the distinction between context and text, indeed between nonfiction and fiction, blurred. I discovered a striking similarity between *The Future Eve* and the research of one of the leading scientists of the day who studied hysteria in wards at the Salpêtrière. Jean-Martin Charcot and Villiers's Edison share a conception of flawed womanhood and the desire that springs from it: to make a new, artificial Eve.

In late-nineteenth-century France, men of letters and men of science collaborated to produce a new fiction of femininity. *The Future Eve* may be read as a text about hysteria in which Villiers appropriates, internalizes, and finally subverts the psychiatric discourse of his day. In the narrative, Edison plays the role of the all-powerful man of science. His diagnosis of the "woman problem" as an inherent disconnection between body and soul and his proposed "cure" — the creation of an android — constitute a startling echo of what actually took place in Charcot's clinic, where hysteria was studied. *The Future Eve* absorbs the scientific language of the time, articulating a critical anatomy of a positivist's dream. And yet, paradoxically, Villiers's fiction provides a context for the writings of Charcot rather than the other way around, despite the fact that the former would not exist without the latter. For while Villiers's novel is nourished by the ideas, the vocabulary, and the clinical tools of the laboratory which enter the narrative, it is also in his fiction that these nonfictive phenomena are exposed.



Hysteria, as it came to be understood by Charcot and others, played an important ideological role in the culture, as all scientific theories do and have always done. A disorder defined by its peculiar ability to mimic symptoms of other diseases without having a physiological source, hysteria distinguished itself as not physical and therefore came to occupy that disturbing threshold between fiction and reality.<sup>4</sup> If there is one thing toward which nineteenth-century positivism strove, it was location. To isolate, identify, classify. Hysteria frustrated the very end science sought. Charcot's brilliant stroke was to locate the illness in its very emptiness. Its defining characteristic turned out to be absence. This essential theoretical shift opened the study of the disease to what becomes, in effect, a layering of one fiction on top of another. Hysteria by its very nature was a theatrical disease, a drama of disconnection between outside and inside, or body and "soul" — a gap which lies at the very heart of *The Future Eve*. In an era without demons and one before the advent of Freud's unconscious, hysteria fell into a theoretical vacuum. The female body was viewed as the site of a disturbing and incomprehensible split between inside and out. The dramatic symptoms of the outer body had no inner reference, no location. They did not reveal the workings of the unconscious. They were only themselves, baffling, alarming, but revelatory of nothing.

This weird hysterical emptiness runs through the text of *The Future Eve*, in which no body, no surface, no sign can be interpreted or read through its appearance. It pervades every aspect of the novel: its language, style, themes, and characters. In Villiers's universe, the drama of this hysterical rupture is constantly being played out. Symptoms with no organic source abound, displaying the signs of one thing when in fact they are another. The world of *The Future Eve* is thoroughly disjointed. The banal inhabits the sublime. Beauty is exposed as hideous. Anatomical parts detach themselves from bodies. Voices disincarnate. Words shift, have multiple meanings, or no meaning at all. Bodies are dissected and reassembled. Things are rarely what they appear to be. The experience of the novel is that of entering a place where nothing is transparent. Both its events and its narration are opaque. What you see is not what you get, and, similarly, the language of the narrative is dense with puns, irony, satire, double meanings, and allusions. It is artifice that points to itself as such, evoking theater, opera, illusion.

Satirical and self-reflexive, the book announces its content as the body of a woman. All the female characters in the book participate in this single body, which is viewed, dissected, discussed, and finally rebuilt. Alicia, the bourgeois mistress of Edison's dear friend Lord



Ewald, has driven the nobleman to the point of suicide because of the hysterical, “pathological” deformity between her ideal body and her pedestrian soul. Evelyn, the “modern Fury,” is also described as a hysteric, with an exterior that manifests symptoms that have no internal source. A particularly dangerous and contagious case, Evelyn was successful in driving Anderson, another of Edison’s friends, to his death. As with Alicia, the relationship between Evelyn’s inside and outside is a false one. Alicia’s body, which looks artificial (the living incarnation of the Venus Vitrix statue in the Louvre), is real, while Evelyn’s body, which is artificial, looks real. In both cases the discrepancy between their artificiality (intended or otherwise) and their naturalness, between what they are and what they appear to be, imperils the men in their lives — and the world at large. The problem lies not in their exterior beauty but in their inner horror. Significantly, both women are performers, and, while acting, they momentarily belie their inner corruption: their bodies become vessels that may be filled by any role.<sup>5</sup> However, the “contents” of both actresses stubbornly remain and manifest themselves often enough to become dangerous obstacles to male desire. Only when they are artificially reproduced as surfaces, their insides emptied, do they become benign. On the other hand, Anderson’s devastated widow, Sowana, is a completely ruptured woman whose empty body has been reinhabited by scientific forces. Edison’s explanation of her condition and treatment reads like a case history of hysteria from the Salpêtrière, complete with the *agent provocateur* (excessive grief), the onset of symptoms with no anatomical lesions, and the management of her disease through hypnosis. Fragments of these three women provide Edison with the motivation and the material to create his android Hadaly, who, in the end, embodies most perfectly the late-nineteenth-century medical ideal: a void and transparent female specimen, a perfectly programmed hysteric.

Because no one could locate the disease in the body’s organs, the hysteric — despite her reputation as wily and uncooperative — offered amazing possibilities for being mastered and reprogrammed. So while hysteria was the most disturbing of female maladies, it was also, potentially the *ideal* female condition, precisely because it could, with the proper action, erase woman’s inherent pathology and turn her into, in Villiers’s words, “a machine for manufacturing the ideal.” Charcot’s tools for this reprogramming — hypnosis, photography, wax and plaster casts, and “dermagrAPHism” (the medical practice of writing on human flesh) — are precisely those used by Edison in his creation of the artificial woman.



The purpose of the many bizarre experiments conducted at the Salpêtrière is, at first glance, obscure. The medical “treatments” were for the most part demonstrative, not therapeutic, and it is easy to understand why Charcot has been accused, both by his contemporaries and by modern critics, of staging spectacles with trained performers in order to dupe the public with fraudulent case studies that supported his theories. His critics are right in claiming that he managed to turn the Salpêtrière into a kind of factory for the production, or rather, the re-production, of hysteria.<sup>6</sup> However, they neglect the fact that this reproduction of hysteria was both a conscious and an acknowledged attempt to create an artificial form of the disease in order to control, manipulate, and perfect its symptoms. It is important to understand that, on its own terms, Charcot’s theory is not riddled with inconsistency. Artificiality was written into the very definition of hysteria, indeed it was its supreme expression. The nature of the disease was to represent the symptoms of other diseases out of nothing. For the neurologist, the leap from “natural” to “artificial” hysteria was an ordering of symptoms for superior classification and understanding. It was a way to refine the illness’s original fiction by seeing it in its more perfect form. The techniques used at the clinic were designed less to rid the hysteric’s body of illness (an illness that by definition had no organic basis) than to create a simulated hysteria. The goal was not a remedy so much as a transformation of undisciplined femininity into a perfectly controlled “artificial” woman. This process – shared by Villiers’s fictional scientist – attempted to empty the female body of its original content and render it perfectly transparent, a pure surface that could then be reinscribed at will.

Hypnosis was the first step in the transformation from the natural to the artificial and was used effectively to turn the “natural” hysteric, with all her unpredictable symptoms and deceptions, into what Charcot himself referred to as an “artificial” hysteric, whose corporal and mental plasticity rendered her completely malleable, ready to be reinvested by science. While the *grande crise* of the natural hysteric was filled with “*formes frustes*,” the term Charcot used to describe any deviations from his taxonomy, the hypnotized, or artificial, hysteric performed Charcot’s stages of hysteria with astonishing precision, displaying or deleting a particular symptom on command. Once mesmerized, her chaotic convulsions could be frozen in time and isolated into a series of separate, controllable gestures, easily manipulated to create more perfect examples. Hypnotism, then, was not used (as it often is today) to discover a hidden truth and reunite the subject with



some notion of its original “self” or history. Rather, it was used to erase any natural content and create an ideal patient in whom doctors could reproduce symptoms at will and then, just as easily, make them disappear. “The hypnotic state,” writes Charcot, “is nothing other than an artificial neurological state whose multiple manifestations appear and disappear according to the needs of the study.”<sup>7</sup> This process — less a question of “turning the inside out” than of irradiating the inside altogether — transformed the hysteric into a kind of pure *sign* of her illness. In this new simulated state, the hysteric no longer menaced medical authority by blurring the categories of real and unreal. Her original contradiction was now replaced by unity. Unlike her original, this representation of illness was demystified and her apparent symptoms were now ordered. Obscurity and chaos were replaced by clarity and harmony.

But Charcot’s experiments with hypnosis were not limited to exhibitions of ideal hysterical symptoms. The Salpêtrière was famous for its spectacular demonstrations that used hysterics as medical statues. Before an audience that included artists and writers as well as other physicians,<sup>8</sup> Charcot would demonstrate how one of his hysterical patients under the influence of hypnosis, could become “a lump of clay,” ready to be molded “into a kind of statue.”<sup>9</sup> In one presentation, a patient’s flesh was pierced with large needles. Perhaps nothing demonstrates so graphically Charcot’s reversal of the Pygmalion tale. Here the real woman is transformed into a statue, a person who has no internal corporeality. Indeed the photographs that document this experiment show that no bleeding was induced by the punctures. In another demonstration, a hypnotized patient was rendered rigid and placed in gravity-defying suspension between two chairs, supported only by her head and feet. Apparently, the woman was able not only to assume this pose but, as though actually made of marble, could maintain it indefinitely — a feat beyond the capabilities of even the most accomplished acrobat.<sup>10</sup> Notably, this image of the hypnotized patient as a statue crops up again and again in the medical literature of the period. No trope is more appropriate than this one: the physician as sculptor of an ideal, artificial, and infinitely pliable woman.<sup>11</sup>

The statue of the Venus Victrix appears as the image of ideal femininity throughout *The Future Eve*, a reference that firmly establishes Villiers within a long tradition of literary statue worship. Although others before him, such as Théophile Gautier and Prosper Mérimée, also wrote fantasies about statues of women that come to life, Villiers shares Charcot’s decadent, morbid inversion of the Pygmalion myth —



a fantasy in which a woman is petrified into an ideal, lifeless form.<sup>12</sup> Villiers's fictional scientist, a gifted magnetist, also uses hypnosis to immobilize real women, to turn them into stone.<sup>13</sup> Shortly after Alicia appears in the flesh for the first time, Edison "puts her under": "Softly, gradually, her lids closed over her lustrous eyes; her arms, as if petrified into Paros marble, remained motionless, one resting on the table, the other, still holding its bouquet of pale roses, resting on a cushion. Like a statue of the Olympian Venus rigged out in modern dress, she seemed fixed in this attitude; and the beauty of her features, in this posture, seemed almost superhuman" (p. 703). Throughout the novel, the Venus statue is depicted as a "truer" version of Alicia, an ideal that the living woman shamelessly betrays. The actress is frequently compared to the statue, and each time it is the woman, not the statue, who is the flawed incarnation. Unlike the living woman, the Venus is empty, with no thoughts to contradict its ideal form or deflect male desire. Only when Alicia is frozen through hypnosis does she compare favorably with the marble sculpture. Given Ewald's preference for the statue, it is not surprising that Alicia's lover fantasizes about gazing on her corpse: "What I really would like would be to see Miss Alicia dead, if death didn't result in the effacing of all human features" (p. 569).

Once the natural woman is effectively paralyzed, emptied of her offending interior, she can then be reanimated. In the Salpêtrière's clinical writings, this transformation is not described in natural terms, as a rebirth, but in mechanical terms. The newly transformed and improved woman is seen as an automaton. This desire to render the organic mechanical is explicitly articulated by Charcot, who writes that his artificial hysteric is a perfect incarnation of La Mettrie's "l'homme-machine." "It is truly, in all its simplicity, the man-machine dreamed of by La Mettrie, that we have before us."<sup>14</sup> Gilles de la Tourette also describes the artificial hysteric as "a true automaton, obeying her magnetizer's every wish." However, he continues, Charcot's woman-machine is no ordinary toy, like the crude dolls created by Vaucanson: "our automaton is more than one of Vaucanson's simple mechanisms."<sup>15</sup> Villiers's Edison also insists that his creation is far more sophisticated than the "ridiculous monsters" of the eighteenth century. "Albertus Magnus, Vaucanson, Maelzel, Horner, and all that crowd were barely competent makers of scarecrows" (p. 582). Unlike her primitive precursors, the new artificial woman is a dynamic, interactive machine, complete with mechanical buttons that may be pressed for a desired reaction. Charcot's discovery of what he called "hysterogenic zones" is the essential feature of his topography of the female body, a



topography necessary to the transformation of a woman into a kind of machine. Not surprisingly, the most important of these zones were the mammary glands and the ovaries — the obvious characteristics that distinguish women from men. Charcot repeatedly used his patients to demonstrate how these zones were the catalysts for his commands. Like an automaton, the hysteric could be turned off and on at will.<sup>16</sup>

Lord Ewald's relationship to Hadaly, explains Edison, will function like that of a hypnotist to his subject, since she has been programmed to respond to Ewald's suggestions just as the hysteric responds to the suggestions of her doctor. While Charcot's artificial hysteric has "hysterogenic zones," which function as mechanical buttons that trigger programmed responses, Edison's automaton is endowed with an elaborate system of on-off switches, cleverly disguised as jewelry. Each pearl in her necklace and the various rings on her fingers provoke different reactions when lightly pressed. For example, if Ewald wants his mistress to come to him, all he need do is lightly touch the amethyst ring on the index finger of her hand and "she will come to you, better than the living woman" (p. 605). If he wants her to walk straight ahead, he need only touch the ruby on the middle finger of her right hand, while, if he takes her by the arm, she will lean on him "languidly" and follow his movements. By touching the turquoise ring he can make his machine sit down. Each pearl in her necklace is also programmed to trigger a specific physical response, but Edison skips over these details and simply refers his friend to the owner's manual. Hadaly can be anything and everything Ewald desires, a blank page ready to be written according to his desire.

The metaphor of the female body as a blank page onto which men might "imprint" any meaning they chose became a physical reality with the medical practice of "dermagraphism."<sup>17</sup> Given the hysteric's extreme cutaneous sensitivity, doctors discovered that her skin would redden and white welts would appear when her flesh was lightly traced with a blunt object. In repeated experiments, her body was treated as a canvas on which images were drawn; indeed, doctors frequently dated and signed their names on their "works of art." The hysteric's skin was also treated as blank page onto which words were inscribed, such as her diagnosis, a striking example of how medicine sought not to cure, but to transform the hysteric into a literal sign of her illness. Moreover, not only was her flesh the paper that received the text, but it was also treated as a lithographic plate, a machine capable of endless reproduction: "When this phenomenon has reached the height of its development," explained one doctor, "when the plate and the relief are



well formed, the part of the skin in question clearly resembles a printing press.... The words inscribed in this manner jut out so much that not only is it very easy to read them, but it would be possible to run off actual copies."<sup>18</sup> The artificial hysteric, more authentic, more genuinely hysterical than her original model, becomes a machine for reproduction, capable of generating endless copies.

Dermagraphism was not the only method of inscribing the hysteric. Once hypnotized, the patient was imprinted — French physicians significantly employed the verb *imprimer* — with synchronized gestures and expressions. And unlike the natural hysteric, whose body was subject to chaotic fits and starts, the artificial model was designed to run smoothly. By arranging the patient's limbs in various poses, such as clasping her hands together as though in prayer, or extending her arms forward as though in fright, the corresponding expression (piety or fear) would automatically appear on her face. These gestures and expressions could be infinitely varied, from the most banal (such as wiping her nose) to the most sublime (ecstatic prayer). In short, the possibilities were endless, limited only by the doctor's imagination. This new woman-machine, with her infinite capabilities, ran so smoothly that the physician, appropriately referred to as the "operator," could run his automaton in reverse, imprinting facial expressions to produce the corresponding gesture.<sup>19</sup> However, given the obvious difficulties in molding the face, electrical stimulation (a technique created by Charcot's close friend and colleague Duchenne de la Boulogne) was applied. Electrodes applied to the hysteric's expressionless face would set in motion the entire repertoire of facial expressions. By stopping the current when the desired look appeared, the expression would remain indefinitely imprinted and the appropriate gesture would follow mechanically.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the natural woman, whose body manifested disorder, the artificial version displayed complete synchronicity. The stormy female body had been transformed into a predictable machine.

Like Charcot's artificial woman, Villiers's machine is inscribed with gestures, facial expressions, and texts. And like Charcot's version, in which there is a "always a perfect coordination that presides over the varied poses that the operator imprints," she is designed to run more smoothly than her natural, conflicted model.<sup>21</sup> Edison elaborates on the ways in which he has ironed out the kinks and succeeded in constructing a flawless, perfectly harmonious woman. He uses the mechanical analogy of a "Barbary organ," a kind of player piano, to describe the cylinder on which Hadaly's gestures and facial expressions are inscribed. Hadaly's lungs, explains Edison, are two golden phono-



graphs on which many hours of “suggestive” and “captivating” speech are recorded. These presumably male texts are read by the hypnotized Miss Alicia, and thanks to “galvanoplastics” are indelibly inscribed on the central tapes of the android. In a process not unlike Duchenne’s mechanical reproduction and synchronization of gestures and expressions, Edison uses electrical current to create a complete homogeneity: “The Cylinder, beneath a similar comb that picks up the extremities of all the inductive nerves of the Android, *plays* (and I can tell you exactly how) *all the gestures, the bearing, the facial expressions, and the attitudes of the woman that one incarnates in the Android*. . . . It follows accordingly, does it not, that the action of the two phonographs, combined with that of the Cylinder, produce a synchronizing of words and gestures as well as of the movement of the lips. And so it is also with the glances of the eyes and the most subtle expressions of the features. You understand that the ensemble of these different programs is regulated in every scene with split-second precision” (p. 653).

Edison’s process of inscribing an artificial woman is also likened to that of a printing press — “the process is rather like that by which printing presses pass from one roller to another the sheets to be printed” (p. 652) explains the scientist — allowing the author to edit his copy in order to achieve the desired one. “By now I can *read* the gesture recorded on this Cylinder,” he explains, “as fluently as a printer’s devil can read off, in reverse, a page of type in a form; it’s simply a question of habit. And so I will correct this first proof of mine to accord with the various physical habits of Miss Alicia Clary . . .” (p. 654). Edison’s artificial woman is a book, written piece by piece with works by the greatest poets, metaphysicians, and novelists, but she is also a printing press, capable of generating endless possibilities. Edison’s masterpiece is interactive since the various possibilities appear only if Ewald so desires, and, as the scientist reassures him, they can always be erased.<sup>22</sup> Ewald need not worry about potential boredom with his mechanical woman since she is plural not singular, a group of women so diverse that “no harem could contain them all” (p. 727). Hadaly is infinitely variable, a machine into which all culture can theoretically be stored. She can be erased and reprogrammed at will.

Photography was another reproductive technique used in the fabrication of artificial women. At the Salpêtrière, photography was used to reproduce the reproductions of hysteria created via hypnotic suggestion. Patients were rarely photographed on the spot during their hysterical fits, but were instead brought to the photography studio where they were hypnotized and their symptoms painstakingly choreo-



graphed in a simulated environment. "The static nature of the hysterical poses induced by magnetism," Charcot points out, "is perfect for the camera."<sup>23</sup> The studio, which was extremely sophisticated and occupied a large area of the hospital, was well equipped with all the necessary props for these scenes: the hospital bed, screens and backdrops, artificial lights, and various hidden devices for immobilizing the patients, whose still bodies would then stage a kind of rigor mortis for the camera. Even at first glance these photographs, preserved in the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, alert the viewer to their "artistic" qualities. Dramatic lighting, staged poses, and the selection of the most photogenic models all point to the "art" of the procedure. Moreover, once the photographs were taken, they were often retouched or manipulated. Backgrounds were lightened or darkened to enhance the subject, and distracting details were scratched out.<sup>24</sup>

The photograph, then, becomes a representation of a representation of a disease that represents. In other words, in order to produce the most perfect images of hysteria, the hysteric — a woman whose illness simulates the symptoms of other diseases — was transformed, through hypnosis, into an artificial hysteric who perfectly simulated the simulations of hysteria. The medical photograph becomes a copy of a copy of a copy, a representation so far removed from the original that all duplicitous traits were easily erased, leaving the deranged and chaotic nature of the original far behind. The photograph succeeded in turning the hysteric into a wholly artificial being, literally a flat, framed, unmoving image. The camera served as an ideal tool of nineteenth-century science. It isolated through classification, capturing not an illness as such, but its ideal form — a woman stopped in time, her "symptoms" preserved for the annals of science.

The photographs of hysterics from the Salpêtrière — those fixed, often beautiful, illuminated images that document not so much an illness as an idea of illness — must be placed beside the women of Villiers's novel, whose qualities will be combined to make Hadaly, who is also the sign of an idea. Edison hypnotizes both Alicia and Evelyn in order to photograph them, and in both cases their pictures are depicted as "truer" versions of themselves. While Miss Alicia Clary is one of the story's main characters, she does not actually appear in her "natural" physical form until the last book of the novel. However, detailed portraits of her extraordinary physical beauty dominate much of the text, emphasizing the fact that the most important aspect of the actress is her representation. Indeed, our first two physical encounters with the beauty are through a photograph. As a representation, emptied of



her disturbing content, she is as ideal as the statue she resembles: "Prodigious!" exclaims Edison when he looks at the photograph of Alicia. "It's nothing less than the famous VENUS of the unknown sculptor! It's more than prodigious, it's absolutely stunning!" (p. 577). Our next encounter with Alicia is also as an image, although this time it is not as a photograph but as a reflection. About to appear in the flesh for the first time, she is first seen reflected in a mirror. Edison himself articulates the significance of the episode: "And in a way it's not surprising that your fine lady appears to me in her reflection, since that's what I'm going to take from her" (p. 692). Alicia's reflection is her only worthy aspect. And even when she finally enters the room, the real woman continues to appear (at least until she opens her mouth) as a representation, as a statue: "The woman was stunning; a living evocation of the *Venus Victorious*. Even at first glance, her resemblance to the divine statue appeared so striking, so incontestable, as to give one an indefinable shock. Here was certainly the human original of that amazing photograph which four hours earlier had been projected on the wall screen" (p. 692).

The latest developments in photography — color film and photo sculpture — are essential ingredients in Edison's production of Hadaly. Alicia is repeatedly photographed in order to duplicate her exact coloration and form, which will then be "photosculpted" onto the android herself, who is, as Marie Hope Lathers points out, literally described as a photograph.<sup>25</sup> As Edison explains to Ewald, as part of the daily maintenance of his new machine, he will need to bathe Hadaly, to submerge her in the appropriate chemicals, just as one needs to soak a print in developing fluids: "You know very well that all photochromatic prints should stay at least several hours in a special solution that reinforces them" (p. 609). As an animated photograph, Hadaly takes to new extremes Charcot's medical ideal of a photographed, artificial woman.

Along with the photograph, wax and plaster casts of body parts were yet another method used to reproduce hysteria. During Charcot's tenure at the Salpêtrière, he established a special laboratory of pathological anatomy, which included a modeling studio.<sup>26</sup> These wax and plaster models were cast from both living and dead hysterics, and casts of fragmented body parts — for the most part, female arms and feet — were the bulk of the studio's sculptural output. Like hypnosis and photography, sculpture immobilized the female body and offered more regular and perfect examples of hysteria than real women were capable of providing.<sup>27</sup> Broken into separate parts, a woman could be reas-



sembled and rebuilt in any way her physician desired. In fact, in the Salpêtrière's studio, casts of dismembered arms were presented side by side with reproductions of the armless statue of Venus.

In a novel about making a woman, fragments of the female body appear scattered throughout the text. Figurative and literal dissections of female anatomy dominate the novel. Alicia's sublime exterior is verbally dissected, while Evelyn's decaying parts are exhumed one by one. Hadaly's anatomy is vivisected, piece by piece, in order to show Ewald precisely what constitutes the ideal woman. Much of the book is devoted to the android's simultaneous construction and dissection, in which her body is divided into four categories and then subdivided into smaller anatomical parts, each analyzed in scrupulous detail. This somatization of the text, or textualization of the body, begins with the novel's title and continues throughout the book, in which many of the chapter titles ("Rosy Mouth," "Physical Eyes," "Hair," "Epidermis") are a literal record of a particular part of her anatomy.<sup>28</sup> *The Future Eve* is at once a book and an anatomy, or rather, the simultaneous construction of a book and a body, a body that is an assembly of empty parts, ready to absorb any meaning — and equally ready to delete it.

The macabre yet beautiful dismembered female arm that appears twice in the novel (a reference to the Venus statue) is also a sign.<sup>29</sup> In typical decadent fashion, the arm, resting on a cushion of purple silk, is adorned with jewels: "The delicate wrist was encircled by a viper of enameled gold; on the ring finger of the pale hand glittered a circlet of sapphires" (p. 537). When the arm reappears later in the novel, we discover that it is artificial. Lord Ewald, who picks up the "human relic," is amazed to find that it is still warm and that the hand responds to his touch. Given its heat, weight, and color, he is convinced that the flesh is real. However, Edison quickly informs him that it is "better than real" (p. 581). Edison's art improves on nature. His dream of perfection is not dissimilar to Charcot's representation of ideal forms, which are not limited by natural law: "This copy, let's say, of Nature — if I may use this empirical word — will bury the original without itself ceasing to appear alive and young. Before growing old, it will perish in a thunderclap. It is *artificial flesh* . . ." (p. 581).

This fragmentation of the female body is, of course, a form of fetishism, in which the artificial piece of a woman's body acts as a substitute — in Freud's terms, as a phallic displacement for the castration threat posed by biological female sexuality. The curiosities of Charcot's workshop, with its fake dismembered arms and feet, as well as the bizarre contents of Edison's house, with its false body parts, are united



in what must be seen as a common mistrust of the "natural" body. After all, scientists dissected corpses, but the real body was insufficient to the task at hand. And that task, laden as its descriptions are with the noble aims of science, is ultimately erotic or, perhaps more accurately, safely erotic. According to Freud, the fetish "should offer a token of triumph over the threat of castration and safeguard against it."<sup>30</sup> Karl Kraus's comment that "there is no more unhappy being under the sun than a fetishist who pines for a boot and has to content himself with an entire woman" could, as Emily Apter points out, easily be applied to Charcot and his disciples, and I might add, to Edison and Ewald.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Kraus renders a perfect description of Villiers's heroes. Throughout the novel, natural women are depicted as dangerous to men. This threat lies at the heart of Villiers's irony and satire, and it is out of this danger that his book exposes the perversion inherent in the fear. The overriding mythical strain in the novel is the one announced by the title — the Eden myth. Ewald plays Adam to Edison's God in a garden of science, Menlo Park, where omnipotent divinity grants man his helpmate: woman. But this is an inverted Eden. If the original Fall was from a perfect natural state to an imperfect one (in which human beings die), Edison's version of *Paradise Regained* is a postlapsarian movement from an imperfect natural state to a perfect artificial one. Corrupt nature lies at the heart of both myths, but while the first one explains death through free will (Eve, tempted by the serpent, acts), the inverted myth attempts to recover immortality by robbing Eve of that which resulted in the Fall (free will). The New or Future Eve is emptied of all inner life and turned into a shell. The bitter irony in this is that her perfection recalls nothing so much as a corpse.

Alicia's Venus-like image is ideal, and Evelyn's unnatural parts are "rosy," "young," and "beautiful." Since women are creatures of artifice anyways, and dangerous because their beautiful artificial exteriors mask a horrible natural interior, why not, argues Edison in a fit of Charcotian logic, replace them altogether with a thoroughly artificial substitution?: "Well then, I thought, if the Artificial, when assimilated to or even amalgamated with human nature, can produce such catastrophes; and since, consequently, any woman of the destructive sort is more or less an Android, either morally or physically — in that case, one artifice for another, why not have the Android herself?" (p. 647). Like the hysterics at the Salpêtrière whose symptoms Dr. Charcot attempted not to cure but to replace with copies, Edison also recommends substitution, taking his cue from women themselves: "Since *all*



these women are more or less artificial, since it is Woman herself who suggests the notion of being replaced by the Artificial, let's spare her the trouble, if that may be" (p. 647).

In this light, one can argue that Hadaly herself is a fetish, a supreme substitute for the mother's missing phallus, which her natural sisters constantly and annoyingly recall. Edison's machine is *almost* an identical physical copy of Alicia. Almost, because while Edison spares no detail in describing the exactitude of his simulacrum, down to the precise configuration of her fingernails and eyelashes, her sexual organs are eclipsed. Villiers's ideal woman is a sterile machine completely devoid of innate sexuality. Not only is she missing the female sex organs, but in their place is a smooth and seamless metallic casing that masks the pure science of man, not the imagined organic pathology of natural women. While her construction is complicated, it is nonetheless completely knowable, an elaborate and smoothly running network of magnetic motors, electrical currents, wires, rods, inductors, stainless-steel discs, cylinders, nickel strips, magnets, platinum, mercury, glass, crystal, and gold. In her absolute purity, explains Edison, she is "an angel," "hermaphrodite and sterile" (p. 667). Unlike her namesake, this future Eve inspires pure, spiritual love. Without woman's sexuality, Adam can escape carnal temptation and thereby safely project his desire without the threat of castration.

The notion of the artificial copy surpassing the original is at the heart of Charcot's clinic and Villiers's novel. For both, the relationship between the original and the reproduction is problematic, and for both the reproduction ultimately displaces the original to occupy the position of "truth." Moreover, for both Charcot and Villiers, artifice is presented as more natural than nature, as more real than reality, and thereby throws into question the very status of the original and the copy. In the proliferation of the representations of hysteria, a subtle exchange between model and copy occurs, and eventually their roles become reversed. In the end, it is the hysterics who become the works of art that represent hysteria, while the works of art — the spectacles, photographs, sculptures, drawings, and so on — are posited as the original models, revealing a desire to reconstruct femininity, to fabricate an artificial woman who would be more "real" than her original. Charcot himself referred to the Salpêtrière as a "museum of pathological anatomy" and to Augustine, one of his leading ladies, as an artwork, "a masterpiece, a very regular, very classical example."<sup>32</sup> The artistic or artificial reproduction of hysteria allowed for the creation of a more reliable specimen. Indeed, while discussing his use of hypnotism,



Charcot goes so far as to claim that, through artificial hysteria, he is even able "to reproduce artificially that which is *sublime* about the genre and *ideal* about the pathological physiology."<sup>33</sup>

In Charcot's clinic and in the imaginary Menlo Park of Villiers's novel, artifice replaces nature. The highly fictionalized, aesthetic quality of the former forces the reader to see the latter as less of an outrageous fiction than an ahistorical reading might suggest. But Villiers, unlike the clinicians at the Salpêtrière, troubles his fiction. His Edison, a figure plucked from the "real" world, is given the dream of his age: the quest for perfection through science. In this case, its object is woman. And while Edison's realized fantasy of an artificial woman matches in many ways Charcot's similar fantasy, Edison, in the end, is a raving madman, a figure continually glossed by the narrative voice and by Ewald, who functions as a spectator of Edison's inventions, very much as the reader does. Villiers's irony rises from a double Eden myth, the first natural and original and the second mechanical and reproduced. In *The Future Eve*, there is no romantic return to perfection in nature, to a golden age. It is decadent. Within the confines of Menlo Park, even nature looks artificial: "The horizon looked like a stage setting; the air moved heavily beneath the gusts of a warm breeze which tossed the heaps of fallen leaves. From the south far into the northwest stretched long lines of monstrous clouds like so many bundles of violet wadding edged in gold. The sky itself seemed artificial..." (p. 713). And what is posed as "natural," Evelyn's putrid body, for example, is mediated through scientific means — elaborate machinery. The Eden of science is mediated and reproduced. Like Walter Benjamin's famous meditation on the same theme, Villiers's novel complicates the very idea of the "authentic," the "original." What place does the original have in a world of endless copies? Is it possible to distinguish one from the other?

The android Hadaly is at bottom a work of art, and Edison, her creator, is the scientific artist. Her genesis, however, is significant. For the android's true "original" isn't Alicia, but the Venus in the Louvre, and it is only Alicia as an externalized sign of beauty that interests the two men. Art is reproduced in "nature" and reproduced again in a machine. Hadaly is a copy of a copy of an ideal form. (Hence the morbid joke of the dismembered arm: the ideal sculpture is incomplete.) The motion of progress, presumably a movement forward, is made ironic by Villiers as it traces itself backward, here to classical sculpture. In the narrative the future measures itself against the past, a past which is then infinitely reproduced in mechanized form. Replica-



tion and reproduction constitute a progressive distance from any living ground. It is not without reason that Hadaly travels in a coffin. She is, in effect, an animated corpse. Ewald's self-proclaimed necrophilia, his wish for the "dead," not the living, Alicia, as well as his unabashed love for the Venus statue, for cold, lifeless marble rather than flesh, serves as the engine of desire in the book. For, despite the fact that Ewald finds himself at times horrified by Edison's android and asks the central question "How does one love zero?" (p. 658), Ewald, an aesthete, participates in the manufacturing of precisely that: a void. This second Eden is an underground tomb. The male desire that animates the narrative and literally "animates" Hadaly is bankrupt, but not without poignancy. Loving zero, as Edison points out, is exactly what human beings can do. Desire is the state of longing for an object, and the story of *The Future Eve* is the narrative of longing that remains unfulfilled. Not only does the android die at sea — the quintessential romantic death — she is impenetrable, a sealed, closed being who can never be sexually penetrated. The book's eroticism is "ideal," not pornographic. Hadaly is not a sex toy but a vessel for aesthetic dreams, a kind of cumulative cultural monster, the sign of a sign of a sign.

While Villiers's tale of scientific paradise is cautionary, the related story being written in the laboratory was not restrained by conscious irony. The manufacturing of an artificial hysteria through hypnosis had produced not only a more perfect medical specimen but, according to the clinicians, a happier patient.<sup>34</sup> Gilles de la Tourette argued that the artificial hysteric had become "her intelligent double, so to speak."<sup>35</sup> By eradicating her naturalness — which was constructed as pathological — the artificial state produced a calm and harmonious femininity, an empty shell that could be occupied by man's ideal. Artifice, not nature, opens a path to the ideal. Once the natural woman, who is seen as an obstacle to this appropriation, is replaced by her artificial simulacrum, she can be animated by male fantasy. This dream displacement, or "suggestion," made possible through science is what breathes "life" into the artificial woman, whether it is Charcot's or Villiers's "machine to manufacture the ideal." However, it is in *The Future Eve*, a fiction made from this fiction, that the anatomy of an artificial hysteric becomes fully articulated and exposed for what it is: an empty corpse filled with the dreams of men.



## NOTES

1. The group of symbolist poets that declared their debt to Villiers included Paul Valéry and Maurice Maeterlinck who claimed "all that I have done I owe to Villiers." See A.W. Raitt's informative and moving biography *The Life of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 296–303.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 198–99 and pp. 206–207.

3. The friends were Emile Bergerat, who made a casual mention of *The Future Eve* in *Le Figaro*, and Rodolphe Darzens (for whom Villiers was once a second in a duel with Jean Moréas), who wrote a few lines for *La Pléiade*. See "Histoire du texte" in *Oeuvres Complètes*, 2 vols., eds. Alan Raitt and Georges-Pierre Castex (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), vol. 1, pp. 1559–60.

4. Epilepsy, gangrene, tetanus, strychnine poisoning, meningitis, heart disease, comas, Parkinson's disease, sclerosis, paralysis, blindness, deafness, pregnancy, and even death were among the diseases and conditions whose symptoms the hysteric was able to simulate.

5. For an analysis of the role of the actress in nineteenth-century fiction, see Ross Chambers's important study, *L'Ange et l'automate: Variations sur le mythe de l'actrice de Nerval à Proust* (Paris: Archives des Lettres Modernes, 1971).

6. In *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Macula, 1982), Georges Didi-Huberman persuasively argues that Charcot "invents" hysteria. While my reading owes much to his insightful analysis, I am not so quick to condemn Charcot. As I will attempt to show, this "invention" of hysteria was both a coherent and acknowledged strategy on the part of Charcot and his colleagues at the Salpêtrière, and not an outright contradiction.

7. See Jean-Martin Charcot, "Leçons sur la métallothérapie et l'hypnotisme," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Progrès Médical, 1886–1893), vol. 9, p. 310. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

8. Members of the audience included Maupassant, Huysmans, Alphonse and Leon Daudet, Théodore de Banville, Jules Claretie, Henri Bergson, Emile Durkheim, and Sarah Bernhardt as well as artists, architects, musicians, visiting royalty, politicians, the prefect of police, and other members of high society. See Georges Guillain, *J.-M. Charcot (1825–1893): Sa vie, son oeuvre* (Paris: Masson, 1955), pp. 32–33. Villiers was fascinated with hypnotism, and while there is no record of him ever having attended the demonstrations at the Salpêtrière, he was familiar with Charcot's work and mentions him in the article "La Suggestion devant la loi" (1888) and again in the unfinished stories "La Séance du docteur Muller" and "L'Ombre de Meyerbeer," not published until 1946 and 1956 respectively. According to his biographer, he used to visit a certain Dr. Latino, known for curing mental illness with hypnosis. See Raitt, p. 302. Hypnosis also appears in "Claire Lenoir" and "Les Expériences du docteur Crookes" as well.

9. See Charcot, "Leçons sur la métallothérapie et l'hypnotisme," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 9, p. 442.



10. Like the body piercings she underwent, this unnatural position (and many others like it, well-documented in the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*) was used to authenticate the hypnotic trance, since no matter how skilled an impostor might be, she could never simulate the unnatural feats of the hypnotized hysteric. For photographs of this strange phenomena, see, for example, "Léthargie: hyperexcitabilité musculaire," plate 14 in the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, vol. 3.

11. The English physician Daniel Hack Tuke provides the following account of a patient at the Salpêtrière who had been hypnotized: "She did not move; she was fixed — she was transformed into a statue, so to speak." Gilles de la Tourette and Paul Richer also speak of the hypnotized hysteric as a statue. Discussing the infinite possibilities that such a malleable form offers, they describe her as being "*une sorte de statue*." Gilles de la Tourette and Paul Richer, "Hypnotisme," in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, 1864–1885 (Paris: G. Masson, 1889), p. 96. W.J. Morton, one of the many American physicians to visit the Salpêtrière, uses a slightly different image — that of a wax figure — to describe the artificial hysteric: "The patient may be molded at will like a waxen figure, into any pose one pleases, and the position will be retained." W.J. Morton, *New York Medical Record*, 1881, cited by Esther M. Thorton in *Hypnotism, Hysteria and Epilepsy: An Historical Synthesis* (London: William Heinemann Medical Books, 1976), p. 147.

12. See, for example, "Omphale, histoire rococo" (1834), "La Cafetière" (1831), *Le Roman de la momie* (1857), and "Arria Marcella, souvenir de Pompéï" (1852) by Théophile Gautier, and *La Vénus d'Ille* (1852) by Prosper Mérimée, in which art objects come to life.

13. The image of the magnetized woman as a statue also appears in an unfinished story by Villiers entitled "L'Ombre de Meyerbeer" (1884). Although there are gaps in the text, a narrative is nonetheless retrievable. In it he describes a visit to a doctor on the Parc Monceau, who conducts hypnotic demonstrations even more extraordinary than "Dr. Charcot's experiments at the Salpêtrière." His hypnotized female subject is described as being "immobile, like a statue." See Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 2, p. 920.

14. Charcot, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, p. 337.

15. Gilles de la Tourette and Paul Richer, "Hypnotisme," in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, pp. 88–89.

16. Charcot even developed a mechanical device that he called the "ovary compressor"; it attached to the patient's abdomen and worked like a vice grip, applying pressure to the hysterogenic zone in order to elicit or end a hysterical attack.

17. For medical literature on dermagraphism, see Félix Allard and Henry Meige, "Effets produits par les différents modes d'excitation de la peau dans un cas de grand dermographisme," in *Archives générales de médecine* 8.10 (July–December 1898), pp. 33–50; G. Dujardin-Beaumetz, "Note sur des troubles vaso-moteurs de la peau observés sur un hystérique," in *L'Union médicale* 144.9 (December 1879); Docteur A. Ducamp,



"Dermagraphisme chez un hystérique," in *Gazette Hebdomadaire des sciences médicales* (Montpellier, 1890); Dr. E. Chatelain, "Pseudo-urticaire dermatographique," *Journal des maladies cutanées et syphilitiques*, 3e année (October 1891); and M. Mesnet, "Autographisme et stigmates," in *Bulletin de l'académie de médecine* 54.3 (1890), pp. 362–80. For contemporary accounts of dermatographism, see Georges Didi-Huberman, "Une Notion du corps cliché au XIXe siècle," in *Parachute* 35 (June–August 1984), pp. 8–14 and "L'Incarnation figurale de la sentence (note sur la peau 'autographique')," in *Scalène* 2 (October 1984), pp. 143–69; Asti Hustvedt, "The Pathology of Eve" in a forthcoming book of essays edited by John Anzalone and published by Rodopi; and especially Janet Beizer's informative and fascinating book, *Ventriloquized Bodies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 20–29.

18. G. Dujardin-Beaumetz, "Note sur des troubles vaso-moteurs de la peau observés sur un hystérique," p. 921.

19. See de la Tourette and Richer, "Hypnotisme," p. 95.

20. See Guillaume Benjamin Armand Duchenne, *De l'électrisation localisée et son application à la pathologie et à la thérapeutique*. Charcot describes this procedure in his "Leçons sur la métallothérapie et l'hypnotisme," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 9, p. 442, reprinted in Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie*, p. 284. Also see de la Tourette and Richer, who lift this lesson verbatim in their article "Hypnotisme," pp. 96–97.

21. De la Tourette and Richer, "Hypnotisme," p. 95.

22. As Raymond Bellour has argued, Hadaly is a sort of "Woman-Computer." See Raymond Bellour, "Ideal Hadaly" (On Villiers's *The Future Eve*), *Camera Obscura* 15 (1986), p. 111.

23. Charcot, "Leçons sur la métallothérapie et l'hypnotisme," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 9, p. 443, reproduced in Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie*, pp. 283–84. Some of the photographs of the "natural" hysterics are blurred by the patients' uncontrolled movements. See, for example, plates 29 and 38 in *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, vol. 1.

24. For more on the retouching of the Salpêtrière's photographs, see Didi-Huberman's discussion of the "crucifixion photos," in *Les Démoniaques dans l'art* (Paris: Macula, 1984), pp. 162–65.

25. See Marie Hope Lathers, *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's L'Eve future: Sculpture, Photography, and the Feminine* (dissertation, Brown University, 1990), p. 145.

26. For a lurid description of the Salpêtrière's modeling studio, see Jules Clarétie's novel about the Salpêtrière, *Les Amours d'un interne* (Paris: Dentu, 1883), p. 222.

27. These more perfect artificial versions might be called "hyperreal." For a provocative and informative discussion of the late nineteenth century's taste for postmodern hyperrealism, see Vanessa R. Schwartz, "The Morgue and the Musée Grévin: Understanding the Public Taste for Reality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris," in *Spectacle of Realism: Body, Gender, Genre*, eds. Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).



28. Jean-Louis Schefer discusses this fusion between body and text in his article "Du Simulacre à la parole," in *Tel Quel* 31 (fall 1967), p. 88.

29. Ross Chambers rightfully claims that this arm is the essential symbol of *The Future Eve*, emphasizing that in Villiers's world "not only language, but the entire human universe is a world of signs whose referents are inaccessible, a world that emerges, like Edison's artificial arm, from an empty foundation" (Chambers, *L'Ange et l'automate*, p. 47).

30. Sigmund Freud, cited by Charles Bernheimer in his excellent study *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 124.

31. Karl Kraus, as cited by Jean Bellemin-Noël, *Gradiva au pied de la lettre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), p. 258, and quoted by Emily Apter in *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 28–29. Indeed, this quip could easily be applied to the male erotic imagination that characterizes much of decadent literature. One of the more striking examples can be found in Remy de Gourmont's short story "The Dress," included in this volume, in which the protagonist falls madly in love with a prostitute's dress. When she insists on removing the precious item before they engage in sex, his fetishistic madness consumes him and he murders the woman in order to enjoy the dress.

32. Charcot, cited by Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie*, pp. 33 and 119.

33. Charcot, *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière Policlinique, 1887–88* [Notes de cours de MM. Blin, Charcot, Colin] (Paris: Progrès médical, Delahaye & Lecrosnier), p. 136, emphasis added.

34. Charcot frequently noted that his patients seemed happier in their artificial state than they did in their natural state, while Charles Richet claimed that they displayed an uncharacteristic grace in both manners and speech when they were hypnotized. See "Les Démoniaques d'aujourd'hui," *Revue des deux mondes* 37 (Jan. 15, 1880), p. 152.

35. Gilles de la Tourette, *L'Hypnotisme et les états analogues au point de vue médico-légal* (Paris: Plon, 1889), p. 120.







# THE FUTURE EVE

by Villiers de l'Isle Adam

## CONTENTS

Advice to the Reader .....	524
----------------------------	-----

### BOOK I MR. EDISON

CHAPTER I	Menlo Park .....	525
II	Phonograph's Papa .....	527
III	The Lamentations of Edison .....	528
IV	Sowana .....	530
V	A Summary Soliloquy .....	532
VI	Mysterious Sounds .....	533
VII	A Dispatch .....	535
VIII	The Dreamer Touches a Dream Object .....	537
IX	Retrospective .....	539
X	Photographs of World History .....	541
XI	Lord Ewald .....	545
XII	Alicia .....	549
XIII	Shadows .....	551
XIV	How Substance Changes with Form .....	554
XV	Analysis .....	555



xvi	Hypothesis . . . . .	557
xvii	Dissection . . . . .	561
xviii	Confrontation . . . . .	567
xix	Remonstrations . . . . .	570

## BOOK II THE PACT

CHAPTER I	White Magic . . . . .	573
II	Security Measures . . . . .	577
III	Apparition . . . . .	578
IV	Preliminaries to a Miracle . . . . .	580
V	Amazement . . . . .	586
VI	Excelsior! . . . . .	588
VII	Of the Swiftness of Scholars . . . . .	595
VIII	Time at a Stop . . . . .	597
IX	Ambiguous Pleasantries . . . . .	602
X	Cosi Fan Tutte . . . . .	610
XI	Chivalric Discourse . . . . .	611
XII	Travelers into the Ideal: The Trail Divides! . . . . .	613

## BOOK III AN UNDERGROUND EDEN

CHAPTER I	Easy Is the Descent into Avernus . . . . .	615
II	Enchantments . . . . .	616
III	Birdsongs . . . . .	617
IV	God . . . . .	619
V	Electricity . . . . .	621



**BOOK IV**  
**THE SECRET**

<b>CHAPTER I</b>	<b>Miss Evelyn Habal</b> .....	<b>624</b>
<b>II</b>	<b>Serious Sides of Light Adventures</b> .....	<b>628</b>
<b>III</b>	<b>The Shadow of the Upas Tree</b> .....	<b>632</b>
<b>IV</b>	<b>Danse Macabre</b> .....	<b>640</b>
<b>V</b>	<b>Exhumation</b> .....	<b>643</b>
<b>VI</b>	<b>Honni Soit Qui Mal Y Pense</b> .....	<b>646</b>
<b>VII</b>	<b>Dazzlement</b> .....	<b>648</b>

**BOOK V**  
**HADALY**

<b>CHAPTER I</b>	<b>First Appearance of the Machine in Humanity</b> ....	<b>650</b>
<b>II</b>	<b>Nothing New Under the Sun</b> .....	<b>656</b>
<b>III</b>	<b>Walking</b> .....	<b>661</b>
<b>IV</b>	<b>The Eternal Female</b> .....	<b>666</b>
<b>V</b>	<b>Equilibrium</b> .....	<b>668</b>
<b>VI</b>	<b>Something Striking</b> .....	<b>671</b>
<b>VII</b>	<b>I Am Black but Comely</b> .....	<b>673</b>
<b>VIII</b>	<b>Flesh</b> .....	<b>674</b>
<b>IX</b>	<b>Rosy Mouth, Pearly Teeth</b> .....	<b>678</b>
<b>X</b>	<b>Corporal Fragrances</b> .....	<b>679</b>
<b>XI</b>	<b>Urania</b> .....	<b>680</b>
<b>XII</b>	<b>The Eyes of the Spirit</b> .....	<b>682</b>
<b>XIII</b>	<b>Physical Eyes</b> .....	<b>685</b>
<b>XIV</b>	<b>Hair</b> .....	<b>687</b>
<b>XV</b>	<b>Epidermis</b> .....	<b>688</b>
<b>XVI</b>	<b>The Hour Strikes</b> .....	<b>689</b>



**BOOK VI**  
**... AND THERE WAS SHADOW!**

<b>I</b>	<b>Dinner with the Magician</b> .....	<b>692</b>
<b>II</b>	<b>Suggestion</b> .....	<b>696</b>
<b>III</b>	<b>The Price of Fame</b> .....	<b>707</b>
<b>IV</b>	<b>A Night of Eclipse</b> .....	<b>713</b>
<b>V</b>	<b>The Androsphinx</b> .....	<b>719</b>
<b>VI</b>	<b>Figures in the Night</b> .....	<b>721</b>
<b>VII</b>	<b>Struggles with the Angel</b> .....	<b>723</b>
<b>VIII</b>	<b>Angelic Aid</b> .....	<b>725</b>
<b>IX</b>	<b>Revolt</b> .....	<b>729</b>
<b>X</b>	<b>Incantation</b> .....	<b>730</b>
<b>XI</b>	<b>Night Idyll</b> .....	<b>731</b>
<b>XII</b>	<b>Penseroso</b> .....	<b>733</b>
<b>XIII</b>	<b>Rapid Explanations</b> .....	<b>736</b>
<b>XIV</b>	<b>Farewells</b> .....	<b>746</b>
<b>XV</b>	<b>Fate</b> .....	<b>748</b>



# THE FUTURE EVE

by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

## Advice to the Reader

IT SEEMS PROPER to forestall a possible confusion regarding the principal hero of this book.

Everyone knows nowadays that a most distinguished American inventor, Mr. Edison, has discovered over the last fifteen years a prodigious number of things, as strange as they are ingenious — among others, the Telephone, the Phonograph, the Microphone, and those admirable electric light bulbs which have now spread across the earth's surface — not to speak of a hundred other marvels.

In American and in Europe a LEGEND has thus sprung up in the popular mind regarding this great citizen of the United States. He has become the recipient of thousands of nicknames, such as "THE MAGICIAN OF THE CENTURY," "THE SORCERER OF MENLO PARK," the "PAPA OF THE PHONOGRAPH," and so forth and so on. A perfectly natural enthusiasm in his own country and elsewhere has conferred upon him a kind of mystique, or something like it, in many minds.

Henceforth, doesn't the PERSONAGE of this legend — even while the man who inspired it is still alive — belong to the world of literature? For example, if Doctor Johann Faust had been living in the age of Goethe and had given rise to his symbolic legend at that time, wouldn't the writing of *Faust*, even then, have been a perfectly legitimate undertaking?

Thus, the EDISON of the present work, his character, his dwelling, his language, and his theories, are and ought to be at least somewhat distinct from anything existing in reality.

Let it be understood, then, that I interpret a modern legend to the best advantage of the work of Art-metaphysics that I have conceived; and that, in a word, the hero of this book is above all "The Sorcerer of Menlo Park," and so forth — and not the engineer, Mr. Edison, our contemporary.

I have no other qualifications to note.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam



*To the Dreamers, To the Deriders*

BOOK I

MR. EDISON

CHAPTER I

Menlo Park

*The garden like a lady fair was cut,  
That lay as if she slumbered in delight  
And to the open skies her eyes did shut;  
The azure fields of heaven were 'sembled right  
In a large round, set with the flowers of light,  
    The flowers de luce, and the round sparks of dew,  
    That hung upon their azure leaves did show  
Like twinkling stars, that sparkle in the evening blue.*  
— Giles Fletcher

Twenty-five leagues from New York, at the heart of a network of electric lines, is found a dwelling surrounded by deep and quite deserted gardens. The doorway looks out across a grassy lawn crossed by sanded paths and leading to a kind of large isolated pavilion. To the south and west, two long avenues of ancient trees bend their shadows in the direction of this pavilion. This is Number One Menlo Park; and here dwells Thomas Alva Edison, the man who made a prisoner of the echo.

Edison is forty-two years old. A few years ago his features recalled in a striking manner those of a famous Frenchman, Gustave Doré. It was very nearly the face of an artist *translated* into the features of a scholar. The same natural talents, differently applied — mysterious twins. At what age did they completely resemble one another? Perhaps never. Their two photographs of that earlier time, blended in the stereoscope, would evoke an intellectual impression such as only certain figures of the superior races ever fully realize, and then only in a few occasional images, stamped as on coins and scattered through Humanity.

When one compares the features of Edison with those on ancient



coins, they offer a speaking likeness to those medals of Syracuse which show the features of Archimedes.

One evening of a recent autumn, around five o'clock, the marvelous inventor of so many illusions, the magician of the ear (who, almost deaf himself, like a Beethoven of Science, has been able to create for himself this imperceptible instrument — thanks to which, when it's adjusted to the orifice of hearing, deafness not only dissolves but yields to the sense of sound in its most delicate form) — Edison, in brief — had retired to the darkest corner of his personal laboratory, that is, to the pavilion isolated from his main house.

On this particular evening, the engineer had dismissed his five acolytes, stewards of his shop — devoted workmen all, subtle and learned artisans to whom he gave princely salaries, and whose lips were sealed in his interests. Seated in his American armchair, leaning on his elbow, alone, with a cigar at his lips — he, so little of an idle dreamer, the tobacco simply serving to dissipate in smoke his masculine projects — with a remote and vacant eye, his legs crossed, enveloped in his loose gown (already legendary, of black silk with a violet sash), seemed lost in a profound reverie.

To his right, a lofty window, open to the west, unfolded a vast panorama, within which every object was overcast with a golden-reddish glow.

Here and there about the room one might glimpse, atop the cluttered tables, various precision instruments, intricate and obscure gear boxes, electrical apparatus, telescopes, mirrors, enormous magnets, retorts amid a tangle of tubes, flasks full of mysterious fluids, and slates scrawled over with equations.

Outside, beyond the horizon, the setting sun shot glances and streaks of light through the distant curtains of foliage atop the New Jersey hills, covered as they were with maples and pines; occasionally it lit up the room with a touch of purple or a ray of gold. Then on every side a red light bled from angles of polished metal, from prisms of crystal, from the swollen outline of batteries.

The wind quickened. Showers during the day had freshened the lawns of the park — and had revived as well the heavy, heady Asian flowers blossoming in their green boxes under the windows. Dried flowers, hanging from the roof of the room, swung loose, galvanized by the breeze as if it brought them a memory of their former fragrant life in the forests. Under the subtle influence of this atmosphere, the thoughts of the dreamer, generally quick and brisk, relaxed and submitted insensibly to the seductive attractions of dream and twilight.



## CHAPTER II

## Phonograph's Papa

*'Tis he! . . . Ah! said I, opening my eyes wide in the dark, it  
is the Sand Man!*

— Hoffmann, *Night Tales*

Although his face, despite its graying temples, gives the impression of perpetual youth, Edison is a disciple of the skeptical school. He only invents, he says, in the same way that corn grows — by instinct.

Cool of manner and always conscious of his unhappy youth, he has the taut, dearly bought smile of a man whose mere presence declares to one who meets him, "Become something if you can; I am." Confident in his judgments, he has no use for even the most promising of theories until they are incarnated in facts. Profoundly "humanitarian," he takes more pride in his industry than in his genius. Though shrewd, when he assesses himself, he's in despair at being such a dupe. His favorite foible is to think himself IGNORANT, by a kind of legitimate naïveté.

Hence that simplicity of welcome and the mask of rough frankness — sometimes even the show of familiarity — with which he veils the icy realities of his thought. The man of proven genius, who has had the honor of being poor, can always evaluate at a glance the passing figure who chats with him. He knows how to weigh to a scruple the secret motives of those who admire him, how to test a man's probity and real quality and determine the degree of his sincerity down to the finest detail. And all this without the slightest suspicion on the part of his interlocutor.

Having given proof of the good sense and originality with which he is endowed, the great electrician supposes he's earned the right to trifle a bit with his own ideas in the course of his private meditations. There, as one sharpens a knife on a whetstone, he hones his scientific thought on various tough sarcasms, the sparks of which fall even on his own discoveries. In a word, he pretends to fire on his own troops, but mostly with blank cartridges, in order to harden them for battle.

Gladly falling victim, then, to the charms of this absorbing evening, Edison by way of recreation peacefully enjoyed the excellent flavor of his Havana and yielded to the poetry both of the hour and of solitude — that beloved solitude which it's in the very nature of fools to fear.

Like any simple mortal, he abandoned himself passively to all sorts of fantastic and bizarre reflections.



## CHAPTER III

## The Lamentations of Edison

*All grief is but a diminution of self.*

— Spinoza

He was murmuring to himself in an undertone:

— What a latecomer I am in the ranks of humanity! Why wasn't I one of the firstborn of the species? . . . Plenty of great words would be recorded now, *ne varietur* — (*sic*) — word for word, that is, on the surface of my cylinders, since *the prodigious development of the machine now allows us to receive, at the present moment, sound waves from a vast distance!* And these words would be engraved on my cylinders, with the tone, the phrasing, the manner of delivery, and even the faults in pronunciation that the speakers possessed.

We needn't pretend to that galvanoplastic cliché, *Fiat lux!*, a phrase coined approximately seventy-two centuries ago (which besides, according to immemorial tradition — perhaps invented, perhaps not — could never have been picked up by any recording machine). Still, I might have been able to record — for example, just a little after the death of Lilith, while Adam was a widower and I would have been lurking behind some secret thicket in Eden — first of all that sublime soliloquy, "*It is not good for man to live alone!*," and then "*Ye shall be as gods!*," then "*Increase and multiply!*," and lastly the gloomy jest of the Almighty, "*Here is Adam become as one of us!*" — and all the rest. Later, when the secret of my vibrating diaphragm was well known, wouldn't it have been pleasant for my successors to record during the great days of paganism, for example, the famous "*To the most beautiful!*," the angry "*Quos ego!*," the *Oracles of Dodona*, the *Chants of the Sybils* — and all the rest? All the important speeches of men and gods, down through the ages, would have been indelibly engraved in the sonorous archives of copper, so that by now no doubt would have been in any way possible concerning their authenticity.

Even among the *noises* of the past, how many mysterious sounds were known to our predecessors, which for lack of a convenient machine to record them have now fallen forever into the abyss? . . . Who nowadays could form, for example, a proper notion of the *sound of the trumpets of Jericho?* Of the *bellow of Phalaris' bull?* Of the *laughter of the augurs?* Or the *morning melody of Memnon?* And all the rest?

Dead voices, lost sounds, forgotten noises, vibrations lockstepping



into the abyss, and now too distant ever to be recaptured! . . . What sort of arrows would be able to transfix such birds?

Edison touched with a casual finger a button of porcelain set in the wall beside his chair. A blinding blue jet leaped from an electric condenser just a few feet away — a jet capable of striking dead a certain number of elephants. It blazed like lightning through a block of crystal, then disappeared in the same hundred-thousandth of a second.

— Yes, said the great engineer, continuing his meditation, I have this little spark . . . which is to sound what the greyhound is to the tortoise. It could give the sounds a start of fifty centuries and yet chase them down in the gulfs of outer space, ancient refugees from the earth! But on what wire, along what trail, could I send it? How teach it to bring the sounds back, once it has tracked them down? How redirect them to the ear of the investigator? This time, at least, the problem seems insoluble.

Sadly, Edison tapped off the end of his cigar with a little finger. After a silence, he rose with a half-smile and began to walk up and down in his laboratory.

— And to think that after six thousand and some years of painfully doing without my Phonograph, he murmured again, humans were still so insensitive that all they could do was make jokes when my first venture came forth. “A childish toy!” most people grumbled. Of course, I understand that when people are taken by surprise, some stock phrases are necessary to ease the adjustment . . . Still, in that situation I would have tried to develop a few phrases superior to those crude jests that the public shamelessly cracked over my project.

For example, I would have complained that while the Phonograph was reproducing *sounds*, it was unable to represent the sound, say, of the fall of the Roman Empire. It can’t record an *eloquent* silence, or the sound of rumors. In fact, as far as *voices* go, it is helpless to represent the voice of conscience. Can it record the voice of the blood? Or all those splendid sayings that are attributed to great men? It’s helpless before the swan song, before unspoken innuendos; can it record the song of the Milky Way? No? Ah, I go too far. — In any case, I see clearly that to satisfy my peers I must invent a machine that replies before one has even addressed it — or which, if the experimenter says to it, “Good morning, how are you?” will answer, “Thank you, just fine, and yourself?” Or, if someone in the audience sneezes, it will cry out, “Gesundheit!” or “God bless you!” — something of that sort.

— Men are amazing.

— I agree that the voice of my first Phonograph sounded a bit like the voice of Conscience talking with the crafty Pulcinello; but you might have



expected that before men made merry with it, they might have waited till Progress had improved it, as it did the first plates of Nicephore Niepce or Daguerre, ancestors of photochromatic and heliotypic prints.

— Well, since there's no overcoming the craze for skepticism regarding my work, until things change I'll just have to keep secret the amazing, the ultimate development of my research . . . which I have, right here, underground. And Edison tapped lightly on the floor with his foot. — I'd hardly let it go for less than five or six million old phonographs; and since everyone wants a good laugh, well, I'll have the last one.

He paused a few seconds, then shrugged his shoulders:

— Bah, he concluded, there's always something good at the root of human folly. Let's dispense with the empty jokes from now on.

Suddenly a soft whisper, the voice of a young woman murmuring very gently, was heard close by:

— Edison?

#### CHAPTER IV

### Sowana

*How to be astonished at something?*

— The Stoics

Yet not a shadow was there.

He started.

— Is it you, Sowana? he asked aloud.

— Yes. This evening I yearned for fine sleep. I took the ring; I have it on my finger now. You needn't raise your voice; I'm close beside you, in fact I've been listening for some minutes now, while you were playing with words like a child.

— And, *physically*, where are you?

— Lying on the furs in the room downstairs, behind the aviary. I think Hadaly is asleep. I gave her her pills and her fresh water, so that now she is quite . . . revived.

The voice — laughing over its last word — of the invisible being that the electrician had recently named Sowana seemed to come, always quietly and discreetly, from a pillar supporting the violet curtains. In fact, it was a sounding box and reverberated in response to distant whispers carried by electricity — one of those new condensers, invented barely yesterday, by which the individual syllables and tone of the voice are distinctly transmitted.



— Tell me, Mrs. Anderson, Edison resumed after a moment's thought, are you sure you could hear what another person might say to me here?

— Yes, if you repeated it yourself, very softly between your lips, as the other person spoke; the different tones of your answers would enable me to understand the dialogue. You see, I'm like one of the Genies of the Ring, in the *Arabian Nights*.

— And so if I asked you to attach the telephone wire on which we're talking now *to the person* of our young friend, the miracle of which we've often spoken would occur?

— No doubt about it. It's a marvel of thought and ingenuity, but perfectly natural now that it's been brought to reality.

Look, for me to hear you, in the mixed and marvelous state where I now am, all saturated in the living fluid accumulated in your ring, there's no need of a telephone. But for you to hear me, you or any one of your visitors, isn't it true that the telephone whose mouthpiece I'm now holding must be linked to a sounding box, however concealed?

— Mrs. Anderson, tell me . . .

— Give me my sleep name. *Here* I am no longer just myself. *Here*, I forget . . . and no longer suffer. The other name calls me back to that horrible land to which I still belong.

— Sowana, you are absolutely sure of Hadaly, aren't you?

— Oh, you've taught me all about her, your beautiful Hadaly, and I've studied her so thoroughly that I'll answer for her . . . as for my reflection in a mirror. I'd rather be in that vibrant child than in my own self. What a marvelous creature! She exists in the wonderful state where I am at this moment; she is imbued with our two wills, united in her; she is a SINGLE duality. She is not a consciousness, she is a spirit! When she says to me, "I'm but a SHADE," my thoughts are shaken: Ah, I've just had the presentiment — that she is going to incarnate!

The great inventor made a slight gesture of surprise and reflection.

— Ah, well. Go to sleep, Sowana! the electrician replied softly. Alas! he continued, we need a third living soul to bring the Great Work to fruition; and who on earth would dare to think himself worthy of it?

— All right, but tonight I shall be ready, said the voice with a drowsy intonation. A single spark and Hadaly will appear! . . .

There was a moment of mysterious silence after this conversation, as strange as it was incomprehensible.

— In fact, Edison murmured as if to himself, the memory of a similar phenomenon doesn't save one from a certain dizziness. Rather than deepen the sensation, I much prefer to think again, of all those words — unheard and unheard-of words — whose tones are forever lost to Human-



ity because they did not think up the Phonograph before my time.

What lay behind that sudden frivolity of spirit with which the great engineer seemed now to treat the secret — the secret so extraordinary — of which he had just been thinking?

Ah, men of genius are made this way: often one suspects they are trying to blind themselves to their own true thoughts. It's only at the moment when that thought unveils itself, like a lightning flash, that one perceives what motives they had for *seeming* distracted, even while in solitude.

## CHAPTER V

### A Summary Soliloquy

*You will fall silent, O sinister voice of the living!*

— Leconte de Lisle

— It's chiefly in the mystic world, he resumed after a bit, that the lost opportunities seem beyond retrieval. Oh, for the first vibrations of the good tidings brought to Mary! The resonance of the Archangel saying Hail! a sound that has reverberated through the ages in the angelus. The Sermon on the Mount! The "Hail, master!" (*Shalom, rabboni*, I believe) on the Mount of Olives, and the sound of the kiss of Iscariot. The "Ecce homo" of the tragic prefect! The interrogation in the house of the high priest! I'd want to hear that entire trial, the legal aspects of which have been so shrewdly reviewed in our times by that subtle Master Dupin, president of the French Legislative Assembly, in a book as learned as it is timely. How learnedly the erudite counselor distinguishes there, simply from the point of view of legal practice at the time, every different sort of procedural error, all the omissions, non sequiturs, improper deals, and careless details of which Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, and the violent Herod Antipas rendered themselves judicially guilty, in the course of this affair.

For a few moments, the electrician meditated in silence.

— It's apparent, he resumed, that the Word Made Flesh paid little attention to the exterior and sensible parts either of writing or of speech. He wrote on only one occasion, and then on the ground. No doubt he valued, in the speaking of a word, only the indefinable *beyondness* with which magnetism inspired by Faith can fill a word the moment one pronounces it. Who knows if all the rest isn't trivial by comparison? . . . Still, the fact remains, he allowed men only to *print* his testament, not to



*phonograph* it. Otherwise, instead of saying, "Read the Holy Scriptures," we would be saying, "Listen to the Sacred Vibrations." But, alas, it's too late now . . .

The footsteps of the scientist resounded on the floor. Around him, the shades of twilight deepened.

— What's left on earth for me to put on the phonograph? he murmured sarcastically. You'd really think that fate allowed my instrument to appear only at the moment when nothing that man says is worth preserving anymore . . .

After all, though, what's that to me? Invent! Invent! That's my job.

What matter the sound of the voice, the mouth that speaks, the age or the moment when a particular idea was revealed, since throughout the centuries every idea has existed *only in terms of the mind that reflected it*? Is there any reason to think that those who have never learned to *read* would ever have learned to *listen*? To hear the sound is nothing, but the *inner essence*, which creates these mere vibrations, these veils — that's the crucial thing.

## CHAPTER VI

### Mysterious Sounds

*Let him who has ears to hear, hear!*

— New Testament

So saying, Edison placidly lit another cigar.

— No need to exaggerate the disaster, he said, resuming his stroll and puffing at his cigar in the gathering dusk.

— If the phonograph never had a chance to record the authentic, original sound of those famous words, well, that's too bad; but to worry about missing those enigmatic or mysterious sounds that I was thinking about just now, that would be ridiculous.

For they are not what has disappeared but, rather, the awe-inspiring character with which they were invested in the hearing of the ancients — and which all by itself served to animate their basic insignificance. So that neither then nor nowadays could I possibly record exactly sounds whose significance and whose *reality* depends on the hearer.

Even my Megaphone, though it can increase the dimensions (so to speak) of the human ear — and, scientifically speaking, this in itself is a giant step forward — cannot, by itself, increase the value of WHAT the ear hears.



Even if I could completely free the auditory senses of my contemporaries, now that the spirit of analysis has abolished in their modern minds the intimate sense of those sounds from the past, my efforts would be vain; for that intimate sense constituted, in effect, their *true* reality. If I could record them and transmit them to the present age, they would constitute nothing more, nowadays, than dead sounds. They would be, in a word, sounds *other* than what they actually were, and from what their phonographic labels pretended they were — *since it's in ourselves that the silence exists.*

It was while the sounds were still mysterious that it would have been really interesting to render the mystery palpable, and transferable, by catching it in some sort of machine and fixing it across the centuries...

— And yet, what am I saying? the electrician suddenly murmured: I was forgetting that reciprocity of action is the essential condition of all reality. So that, in the last analysis, one can say that *only the walls of the city of Jericho heard the trumpets of Joshua, since only they were fitted to do so.* Neither the army of Israel nor the besieged Canaanites recognized anything unusual in the sound: which comes down to saying that *nobody ever heard it.*

A comparison: Suppose I place the *Mona Lisa* of Leonardo da Vinci in front of a Pawnee Indian or a Kaffir tribesman, or even certain bourgeois of any nationality you want. However powerful the glasses or lenses with which I improve the eyesight of these children of nature, can I ever make them really *see* WHAT they're looking at?

So I conclude that it's the same story with noises as with voices, and with voices as with signs — no man has a right to regret their loss. And in any case, though there are no more supernatural noises nowadays, I can still register some fairly important ones, like the roar of the avalanche, of Niagara Falls, or of the stock market, the sound made by an eruption or by a cannon, a tempest, a mob scene, thunder, wind, oceans, battles, and so on.

A sudden reaction gave Edison pause in the middle of his thought.

— So it's true that from now on my Aerophone is the master of all these hubbubs; and their occurrence from now on, being perfectly familiar, is deprived of all interest.

It was a melancholy conclusion.

— Decidedly, I repeat, the phonograph and I have arrived too late in the history of humanity. A consideration so discouraging that, if I weren't a man of special practical vigor — I'd probably go and lie down, like a new Tityrus, in the shade of some pastoral beech tree; and there, with my ear applied to the receiver of my Microphone, I would let the



days slide past while for amusement I listened to the grass grow — and told myself that a God, most likely, was responsible for my free time.

At this point in his meditation, Edison was interrupted by the striking of a bell, clear and resonant, which resounded through the gathering darkness.

## CHAPTER VII

### A Dispatch

— *Take care: it is . . . — I don't see clearly.*

— *Let him come in!*

— *Luber, The Specter*

The engineer pressed the spring of a hydrogen lamp that happened to be closer to hand than the electric light switch. As it touched the fragile strip of platinum, the gas jet burst into flame. A night light flared; the whole immense studio was suddenly illuminated.

Edison went over to a phonograph, and with a flick of the finger set the machine in motion (for he avoids talking in his own person as much as possible, except to himself).

— All right, what is it? What do you want? the phonograph called into the telephone; it spoke in the slightly impatient voice of Edison.

— Is that you, Martin?

A vigorous voice replied, as from the center of the room, though not a soul was to be seen.

— Yes, I'm here, Mr. Edison; I'm calling from New York, at your Broadway office. I'm forwarding a dispatch received here for you, just two minutes ago.

The voice came from a speaker, perfected but not yet made public — something like a small polyhedral ball suspended from the ceiling by an electric wire.

Edison turned his eyes toward a telegraphic receiver standing on its base beside the phonograph. A sheet of telegraphic paper was already in place.

An imperceptible shiver, a murmur as of spirits in the air, stirred the receiver into action. As the electrician reached forth his hand, the paper leaped from its receptacle, bearing the following swiftly printed message, which Edison carried under the lamp to read.



— NEW YORK, BROADWAY, FOR MENLO PARK NO. 1. — JAN. 8, 4:35 P.M.:  
TO THOMAS ALVA EDISON, ENGINEER. ARRIVED THIS MORNING: WILL VISIT  
YOU THIS EVENING. AFFECTIONATE GREETINGS. — LORD EWALD

Seeing the signature, the engineer gave a cry of surprise and pleasure.

— Lord Ewald! he exclaimed. How can it be? He? Back in the United States? Ah, let him come, my dear, my distinguished friend!

And after a silent smile, in which one might have recognized the skeptic of a few moments ago, he went on:

— No, I've not forgotten that admirable young man who saved my life, all those years ago now, when I was dying of hunger and collapsed in the street up there near Boston.

Everyone else walked past me, saying, "Poor fellow!" But he, the best, the most gracious of Samaritans, without wasting any time on pity, found it in his heart to pick me up, and with a handful of gold to save my life, my work! — And so he remembered my name? I'll receive him with open arms! Don't I owe all my success to him — and the rest of my life?

Edison stepped quickly to a tapestry and laid his finger on an electric button behind it. In the distance, beyond the park and near the main house, a bell sounded.

Almost at once the voice of a merry child rang out from the corner of an ivory desk by Edison's side.

— What is it, father? said the voice.

Edison seized the speaker of a machine hidden behind the drapes.

— Dash, he said, you will admit a visitor to the pavilion tonight, Lord Ewald. Greet him as you would me . . . He is at home here.

— Very well, father! said the same voice, which this time, thanks to a remote switching mechanism, seemed to arrive from the center of an enormous magnesium reflector.

— I expect that he'll dine with me tonight. Don't wait up for me. And be good children. Good night, now.

A charming burst of childish laughter rippled through the shadows on all sides. You would have thought an invisible elf, hidden in the atmosphere, was jesting with a magician.

With a smile, Edison replaced the speaker of the telephone and resumed his stroll. As he passed by an ebony table, he absentmindedly tossed the dispatch among the apparatus littering its surface.

By accident, the paper dropped on an object of a striking and remarkable character — an object whose very presence in such a place was inexplicable. Accidental as it was, the juncture of these two objects seemed



to attract Edison's attention; he paused, considering the event and reflecting on it.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Dreamer Touches a Dream Object

*Why not?*

— The slogan of the Modern Age

It was a human arm, lying on a cushion of violet silk. The blood seemed to have clotted at the shoulder joint; only a few purple blotches on a chiffon scarf nearby gave evidence of a recent operation.

It was the left arm and hand of a young woman.

The delicate wrist was encircled by a viper of enameled gold; on the ring finger of the pale hand glittered a circlet of sapphires. The slender fingers still held a pearl-colored glove, worn several times no doubt.

The flesh still retained an appearance so vital, the surface of the skin was so pure and satiny, that its appearance was as cruel as it was fantastic.

What unknown danger could have necessitated such a perilous amputation? — particularly since the most glowing health seemed still to flood through this soft and gracious fragment of a youthful body?

An icy thought would have frozen the mind of any stranger who had come on the sight.

In fact, the great cottage of Menlo Park, which with its surroundings looks like a castle lost in the woods, is a kingdom to itself. As everyone knows, Edison is a dauntless experimenter who is gentle only to his proven friends. As an engineer and an electrician, his discoveries of every different sort, of which only the least strange are known to the public, generally give nothing more than the impression of a mysterious positivism. He has compounded anesthetics so powerful that, if one takes the word of his flatterers, "one of the damned, swallowing them, would instantly become completely indifferent to the most exquisite tortures of Gehenna." When a new experiment was afoot, what would cause a physicist to draw back? The existence of others? His own?

Ah, when it's a question of a new discovery, what scholar worthy of the name could think even for a moment, without shame and dishonor, of considerations of this order? Edison surely less than any other man; and God be thanked for that fact!

The European press has occasionally cast some light on the character of his experiments. All he cares about is the main point; in his view, the



details deserve nothing more than the passing glance with which a philosopher honors — and perhaps too much at that — mere contingencies.

Some years ago, according to the American newspapers, Edison had found the secret of stopping short, without the least inconvenience, two trains headed toward one another on a collision course under a full head of steam. He then persuaded the director of a branch line of the Western Railway to make an immediate trial of the system, in order to safeguard the patent.

One fine moonlit night, the switchmen therefore set two trains packed with passengers on the same line, heading for one another at thirty leagues per hour. But the engineers lost their nerve at the last minute, in the face of imminent danger, and went quite counter to the instructions of Edison, who was standing on a nearby hillside to watch the experiment and chewing on a cigar.

The two trains collided with a terrible crash. Within an instant, several hundred victims were scattered across the landscape, helter-skelter in every direction. People were crushed, burned, and ground to bits, men, women, and children, both the engineers and the firemen, of whom it wasn't possible to discover even a trace.

The great experimenter murmured simply, — Clumsy idiots!

Any other funeral oration would, in fact, have been superfluous — apart from the fact that eloquence isn't his business.

Since then, Edison is astonished only that the Americans shrink from a second trial, or, as he sometimes says, "a third if need be" — until, in fact, "the procedure is successful."

Any visitor who remembered such experiments from the past — experiments many times renewed — might have had reason to suspect a similar trial in pursuit of some new form of knowledge, at the sight of this radiant arm so rudely torn from its socket.

But as he stood by the ebony table, Edison noted the chit of telegraph paper where it had fallen, between two fingers of the hand. He touched the arm and started, as if a new idea had crossed his imagination.

— Wait, he murmured, what if by some chance this visitor were the one who is to awaken Hadaly!

The word "awaken" was pronounced by the engineer with a sort of hesitation, a curious half-shudder. After a second he shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

— Splendid, now I'm getting superstitious, he concluded.

He passed by the table and resumed his stroll around the room. Evidently preferring the darkness, he turned out the light when he reached it.



Suddenly, outside, across the valleys, the moon passing a gap in the clouds shot a ray through the curtains and directed it, as if with malign intent, onto the table. The pale light caressed that inanimate hand, wandered across the arm, lit up the eyes of the golden viper, and caused the blue ring to sparkle. Then once more night covered all.

## CHAPTER IX

### Retrospective

*Glory is the sunshine of the dead.*

— Honoré de Balzac

Sinking ever deeper into the dark corners of his reverie, Edison, once more in a mocking mood, resumed his thought:

— What is most surprising in history, almost unimaginable, is that among all the great inventors across the centuries, not one thought of the Phonograph! And yet most of them invented machines a thousand times more complicated. The Phonograph is so simple that its construction owes nothing to materials of scientific composition. Abraham might have built it, and made a recording of his calling from on high. A steel stylus, a leaf of silver foil or something like it, a cylinder of copper, and one could fill a storehouse with all the voices and noises of heaven and earth.

So what was engineer Berossus thinking about, that priest of Bel in Babylon? If, four thousand and two hundred years ago, he had put aside his studies on the forms of the gnomon, with a little bit of observation and reflection he could certainly have discovered my apparatus. And how about the subtle Eratoshenes? Instead of spending half a century in his observatory at Alexandria nearly two thousand years ago, all of it devoted to measuring the arc of the meridian between the solstices (and I concede he did it very exactly), wouldn't he have been better advised to think first of recording a sonic vibration on a metal plaque? And the Chaldeans? Why they could have... but no! They lived with their heads in the clouds. The powerful Euclid? The logical Aristotle? And Pythagoras, the poetic mathematician? Or the great Archimedes, he who single-handedly defended Syracuse, inventing fearful grappling hooks and burning mirrors to destroy the Roman fleets far out at sea — didn't he have the same faculties of observation as I do? If I discovered the Phonograph by noting that my voice caused the bottom of my hat to vibrate when I talked into it, didn't he discover his law of fluids by



examining the water in his bath? Why didn't he perceive, long before me, that the vibrations of sound all about us make signatures that can be transcribed like writing?

Ah, if it hadn't been for the criminal act of that soldier in the army of Marcellus, who murdered Archimedes as he was working over a difficult equation, I feel sure he would have beaten me to my discovery. And how about the engineers who built the temple at Karnak, or those of Abu Simbel? Or what of the architects of the sacred citadel of Angkor Wat, those unknown Michelangelos of a temple into which one could fit a couple dozen Louvres, and which is half again as lofty, I think, as the pyramid of Cheops — what of them? Their temple is still to be seen in the northern part of Cambodia; every architrave, every courtyard, every immense column (and there are hundreds of them) is formed and chiseled to perfection, and the whole thing set on a mountain surrounded on every side by a hundred leagues of desert. The temple is so ancient that it's impossible to discover the god for whom it was built, or the source or even the name of the nation that built it; everything about the building of this gigantic miracle has been lost in the night of time! Was it not easier to imagine the Phonograph than a temple like that? — And think of the artisans of King Gudea, dead six thousand years ago, but who is said by the Akkadian inscriptions to have been proud of nothing *except that in his time such progress had been made in the arts and sciences?*

Not to mention the sages of Khorsabad, of Troy, of Baalbeck!

And the mages, who served the ancient satraps of Media! The Lydian craftsmen who in a single night altered the entire landscape around Croesus! There were men of art in Babylon whom Semiramis employed to turn aside the course of the Euphrates. And the architects of Memphis, Palmyra, Sicyon, Babel, Nineveh, and Carthage! The engineers responsible for Is, Tadmor, Ptolemaïs, Ancyra, Thebes, Ecbatana, Sardis, Sidon, Antioch, Corinth, Jerusalem? And the mathematicians of Saïs, of Tyre, of Persepolis long since burned down, of Byzantium, Eleusis, Rome, Caesarea, Benares, and Athens? And think of all the miracle workers who sprang up by the thousands amid immense ancient civilizations — civilizations of which not a name, not a stone, not a wisp of smoke remained even in the time of Herodotus — why did none of them have the wit to invent, before my time, the Phonograph? At least we would now be able to pronounce their languages correctly, as well as their names. So many other names, supposedly immortal, are nothing now but syllables bearing no relation whatever to the sounds by which the phantoms were called whom we want to invoke. How was the world able to do so long without the Phonograph? I simply don't understand.



Can it be that the wise men of these forgotten peoples were like our own, most of whom are good for nothing but to verify, then classify and improve, what ignorant men invent and discover?

There were good men and serious craftsmen on earth five thousand years ago. For example, the engineers of Rhampsinitus of the eleventh dynasty tempered copper more skillfully in those days than Spanish armorers can temper steel today. They were so skillful that now their secret is lost; not even the most powerful of our factories, using the most modern processes, can forge the least of the implements that they made of this metal. It is amazing, then, that among men of this . . . stamp . . . not a single one appeared who was interested in reproducing the sound of his own voice in an indestructible manner! . . . But perhaps, after all, it was invented, rejected, and so forgotten. More than nine hundred years ago the telephone was put to the test and rejected in ancient China, that country of incalculable antiquity and endless cycles, a country long familiar with aerostats, printing, electricity, gunpowder, and so on — in addition to a whole range of things that *we* haven't discovered even yet. Who hasn't heard of the discovery in Karnak of railroad tracks dating back three thousand years? — back to the times when peoples lived only by invasion and conquest? Happily, the inventions of modern man seem likely to be of "permanent" duration. Doubtless they said the same thing in the days of Nabonassar, or even in the age of Prince Xisuthros (Ut-Napishtim), that is, some seven or eight thousand years ago, as I calculate it. Of course, nowadays we're all very "serious" about our accomplishments. On what grounds? I can't imagine. The main thing is to be very confident of our own value, that's all. Without which, every last one of us, having once filled his pockets, would sit back and fold his arms. Myself first of all.

## CHAPTER X

### Photographs of World History

*Instant Photography:*

*A man enters: Sir, I'd like to have my pict —*

*The photographer, leaping forward: Say no more! . . . here it is.*

— Cham

At this point, the glance of the engineer fell on that huge magnesium reflector around which the child's voice had been playing a moment before.

— Photography too has come along very late, he continued. Isn't it



exasperating to think of all the pictures, portraits, scenes, and landscapes that it could have recorded once, and which are now forever lost to us? Painters use their imaginations; but it's absolute reality that the camera would have brought us. What a difference! . . . Well, there's no help for it; we'll never see again, we'll never *recognize* in their true features the things and the men of former times. Of course, it's possible that man will someday be able to recover, either by electricity or by some subtler means, the undying interstellar reverberations of everything that has occurred on earth; but we'd better not count too much on this discovery, for it's more than probable that the entire solar system will have been vaporized by then in the blazing nebula of the *Zeta* of Hercules, which is drawing us into its orbit with every second that passes. Or at any rate, our planet will have been struck by its satellite, crushed and reduced (for all that, its crust is from three or ten leagues thick) to a mere *sack of charcoal*; or else one of our many oscillations on the axis of the planet will have buried us under an enormous layer of ice, as happened in the past. Any one of these things may have happened before we are able to reach into outer space and recapture there the eternal interstellar refraction of things here in the past.

Too bad. For it would have been delightful to possess good photographic prints (taken on the spot) of *Joshua Bidding the Sun Stand Still*, for example. Or why not several different views of *The Earthly Paradise*, taken from the *Gateway of the Flaming Swords*; the *Tree of Knowledge*; the *Serpent*; and so forth? Perhaps a number of shots of *The Deluge, Taken from the Top of Mount Ararat*? (I'll bet that busy Japheth would have carried a camera with him into the Ark, if that marvelous instrument had been available to him.) Later, we would have had photos of *The Seven Plagues of Egypt*, of the *Burning Bush*, and the *Passage of the Red Sea* (with shots before, during, and after the event). There would have been the *Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* of Belshazzar's Feast, the *Funeral Pyre of Sardanapalus*, the *Standard of Constantinople*, the *Head of Medusa*, the *Minotaur*, and so on; and we would rejoice today in postcards of *Prometheus*, the *Stymphalides*, the *Sybils*, the *Danaids*, the *Furies*, and so on and so forth.

And all the episodes of the New Testament — what prints they would provide! All the anecdotes of eastern and western history — what a collection! The martyrs, and all the examples of torture, from that of the Seven Maccabees and their mother to those of John of Leyden and Damiens, not forgetting the chief episodes of Christians set against wild beasts in the arenas of Rome, Lyons, and other cities!

One would want, too, all the scenes of torture, from the very beginning of social life down to recent events in the prisons of the Holy Inqui-



sition, when the *Monks of Redemption*, equipped with their instruments of iron, spent their leisure time over the years in massacring Moors, heretics, and Jews. And the cruel interrogations that have gone on in the prisons of Germany, Italy, France, the Orient, everywhere, why not those too? The camera, aided by the phonograph (they are near of kin), could reproduce both the sight and the different sounds made by the sufferers, giving a complete, an exact idea of the experience. What a salubrious course of instruction for the grade schools, to purify the intelligence of modern children — perhaps even adults! A splendid magic lantern!

And the portraits of all the great founders of civilizations, from Nimrod to Napoleon, from Moses to Washington, from Confucius to Mohammed! Pictures of all the famous women, from Semiramis to Catherine the Great, from Thalestris to Joan of Arc, from Zenobia to Christina of Sweden!

And photographs of all the beautiful women, including Venus, Europa, Psyche, Delilah, Rachel, Judith, Cleopatra, Aspasia, Freya, Maneka, Thais, Akedysseril, Roxalana, the Queen of Sheba, Phryne, Circe, Dejanira, Helen, and so on down to the beautiful Pauline Bonaparte! to the Greek veiled by law! to Lady Emma Harte Hamilton!

And, of course, we'd have all the gods as well, and all the goddesses, down to and including the Goddess Reason, without neglecting Mr. Supreme Being! Life-size, of course!

Well now, isn't it a shame we don't have photographs of that entire crowd? What an album it would make!

Natural history would provide a great field, especially paleontology. There's no doubt in the world that we have a very imperfect notion of the megatherium, for example, that paradoxical pachyderm, and that our notions of the pterodactyl as a gigantic bat, or of the plesiosaurus, monstrous patriarch of the reptiles — are, practically speaking, infantile. These strange creatures fought or flew, as their skeletons still bear witness, in the very place where I now stand today, and no more than a few hundred centuries ago, less than no time; less than a quarter or a fifth of the age of this bit of chalk with which I write on the blackboard.

Nature was quick to pass the sponge of her deluges over these awkward sketches, these first nightmares of Life. And yet, what curious prints might have been made of all these creatures! Alas, the vision is lost forever!

The great experimenter heaved a sigh.

— Yes, yes, everything fades, it's true; even discolorations on collodion, even scratches on steel plates. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, to



be sure! One is tempted to smash the camera, blow up the phonograph, and raise one's eyes to the vaults of heaven (which, for that matter, are only a figure of speech) to ask if this gauzy screen of the Universe comes to us for free, or who fuels its great luminary? Who, in a word, pays the rent on this room of ours, insubstantial as it appears, within which the old riddle is constantly being propounded? And where did they dig up these heavy, old-fashioned stage trappings of Time and Space, so trite and patched-up that nobody believes in them anymore?

As for the mystics, I can propose to them a thought that they may well consider naive, paradoxical, superficial — but one that is odd. God, we know, is supreme, all powerful, perfectly good; and over the centuries, as everybody knows, He has appeared to numbers of people: to dispute it would be heresy. Yet while all sorts of bad painters and mediocre sculptors have struggled to popularize their notions of His features, to make them *chic*, isn't it painful to think that if He would just allow the slightest, most humble photograph of Himself — or just permit me, Thomas Alva Edison, American engineer, His creature, to make a simple phonographic record of His True Voice (for thunder has lost most of its prestige since Franklin), *the day after that event, there wouldn't be a single atheist left on the earth?*

Thus the great electrician, talking only to himself, toyed playfully with the vague idea — actually a matter of indifference to him — of the vital reflexive spirituality of God.

— But in him who reflects it, the living idea of God appears only to the extent that the faith of the viewer is able to evoke it. Like every other thought, God can exist in Man only according to the capacity of the individual. No one knows where illusion begins or what reality consists of. Thus, God being the most sublime of conceptions, and all conceptions existing only according to the particular spirit and the *intellectual* eyes of the seer, it follows that the man who dismisses the idea of God from his thoughts does nothing but deliberately decapitate his own mind.

As he pronounced these last words, Edison stopped short in his meditative stroll and looked fixedly out through the great windows into the lunar shadows.

— All right, then, he said suddenly, one challenge for another! Since Life takes such a high hand with us, and answers our questions only with a deep and dubious silence, there's nothing for us to do but see if we can't bring her out of it! . . . In any case, we can already give her a demonstration . . . of what she amounts to in our eyes.

At these words, the eccentric inventor trembled: he had just noted in



a ray of moonlight the dark shadow of a human being, who had moved between him and the light, behind the glass door leading out into the park.

— Who's there? he cried aloud into the dark — and fondling gently in the pocket of his loose dressing gown of violet silk the butt of a small revolver.

## CHAPTER XI

### Lord Ewald

*You would have said that this woman cast her shadow  
straight into the heart of the young man.*

— Byron, *The Dream*

— It is I, Lord Ewald, said a voice; and even as it spoke, the shadow moved to open the door.

— Ah! My dear lord, I beg your pardon! cried Edison, groping his way toward the electric light. The trains are so slow nowadays that I didn't expect you for another three-quarters of an hour.

— That's why I had a special train with a super-pressurized engine under a full head of steam, said the same voice. I must get back to New York tonight.

Suddenly three oxyhydric lamps under blue-tinted shades flared up under the ceiling; they created an area of electrical luminescence which lit the laboratory like a nocturnal sun.

The person confronting Edison was a young man of twenty-seven or twenty-eight years, tall of stature, and extraordinarily handsome.

He was dressed with such impeccable elegance that it would have been impossible to say of what it consisted. The lines of his build indicated a frame of exceptional solidity, such as is molded by the rugby games and regattas of Oxford or Cambridge. His features were a little cold, perhaps, but at the moment lit up by a gracious and sympathetic smile, tinged with that sort of lofty melancholy which reveals the aristocracy of a character. Though the lines of his face were perfectly regular, the quality of their chiseling suggested supreme energy of decision. Masses of fine hair and a light blond mustache shadowed the whiteness of his youthful complexion. His large eyes, pale blue under almost straight brows, and supremely calm, were fixed on his interlocutor. His hand, gloved in severe black, held an unlit cigar.

His appearance was such that one would expect most women to feel in his presence the breath of an enchanting divinity; he was so good



looking that his very nature seemed to bestow a grace upon one with whom he conversed. At first glance, one might have thought him a Don Juan, with the cold carelessness of the type. But a second glance would reveal in the expression of his eyes that grave and lofty melancholy the shadow of which never fails to signal a despair.

— My dear rescuer, said Edison warmly, moving toward the stranger with hands extended in welcome. How many times I've thought of that providential young man on the road near Boston, to whom I owe my glory, fortune, life itself!

— No, my dear Edison, Lord Ewald answered with a smile, it's the other way around. I'm in debt to you, since it's through your agency that I was of some use to the rest of humanity. The proof lies in what you have made of yourself. The bit of money to which I think you allude meant nothing to me: in your hands, especially then, when you were needy, wasn't it far more valuable than in mine? I mean, of course, in terms of the general interest, which we're obliged never to overlook completely. I owe destiny all manner of thanks for having arranged that particular occasion to use my fortune. And indeed, that's why, in the course of my American trip, I took such pains to come and see you. I came *to thank you for the fact that I found you on the road near Boston*.

And Lord Ewald bowed, even as he shook the hands of Edison.

A little surprised by this speech, delivered with that sort of phlegmatic smile which resembles a ray of sunshine falling on ice, the famous inventor greeted his young friend.

— But how you've changed, my dear lord! Edison said cheerily, inviting Lord Ewald to an armchair.

— And you as well, more than I have! the young man answered, sitting down.

As Edison looked on his visitor, whose face was now in full light, he took notice at a glance of the terrible cloud that seemed to be weighing on his features.

— My lord, he said abruptly, has the speed of your trip to Menlo Park left you, perhaps, a little unsettled? . . . I have here a cordial . . .

— Not at all, answered the young man. Why do you ask?

After a silence, Edison said simply:

— An impression, I beg your pardon.

— Ah, said Lord Ewald, I know what gave you that impression. It's nothing physical, believe me. It is, if I may say so, a long-standing, unremitting sorrow that has finally rendered my expression a bit careworn.

Adjusting his monocle, he looked carefully around him.

— My congratulations on your arrangements here, my dear scholar,



he went on. You're one of the chosen few, and here's a laboratory brimming with promise. Is this one of your inventions, this marvelous light? It's as bright as a summer noon.

— All thanks to you, my dear lord.

— Really, you must have pronounced your *Fiat lux* to achieve this!

— As a matter of fact, I've discovered two or three hundred little things like that, if I may say so; I even hope to keep on a little further along the same road. I work all the time, even while sleeping — even in my dreams I work! I'm a kind of *awakened sleeper*, as Scheherazade would say. But that's all there is to it.

— You must understand the pride I feel in our having met one another on this vast, mysterious pilgrimage. I'm bound to think it was inevitable. As Wieland says, in his tale of *Peregrinus Proteus*, "There is no such thing as luck: we were bound to meet one another . . . and so we did!"

Even as these affectionate words were being spoken, the secret preoccupation of the young man was apparent. There was a moment of silence.

— My lord, said Edison, breaking the silence, will you permit me, as an old friend, to take an interest in your state?

Lord Ewald looked directly at him.

— You have just spoken, the electrician continued, of a sorrow that shows plainly on your face. Well, I'm not in a position to tell you, on the spur of the moment, what I'd like to do about it; but, look — don't you agree that the worst sorrows are lightened by being shared with a devoted friend? Who knows? I'm one of those eccentric doctors who persist in thinking that there's no evil without a remedy.

Lord Ewald could not repress a slight gesture of surprise at this abrupt advance.

— Oh, he replied, the trouble I spoke of rises from a very commonplace accident; in fact, from an unhappy passion, the gloomy effects of which are with me forever. You see, my secret is of the simplest sort imaginable, so let's say no more of it.

— You, cried Edison, you suffering from an unhappy passion? The exclamation slipped out in spite of him.

— Excuse me, my dear Edison, interrupted Lord Ewald, but I have no right to waste on my own private affairs time that should be devoted to the general interest. It seems to me our conversation would be much more interesting if we brought it back to your concerns.

— My time? Well, everyone owes you a little bit of it. And we all know that those people who admire me today, the people who've formed gigantic corporations on the strength of my inventive achievements past or to come, would have let me die like a dog if they had



been in your place. I'm not altogether forgetful of that episode. Humanity can wait; I believe it's superior to its own interests, as a Frenchman said somewhere. Personal affection has rights just as great as those of humanity, my lord; my feelings entitle me to insist on that measure of confidence which I requested just now, since I feel that you are in pain.

The Englishman lit a cigar and considered.

— Well, Mr. Inventor, he said at last, you speak so generously that I don't see how I can hold out against your kindness. Let me say, however, that I never had the slightest expectation that before I was fairly seated in your house, I would be choosing you for a confidant. I can see that, with electricians, everything happens at the speed of light. But since you ask, here it is: I have the misfortune of being in love, painfully so, and for the first time in my life (and in our family, the first love is almost always the last, that is, the only one). She is a very beautiful person — well, let me say this, *the most beautiful person in the world*, in my opinion. At the moment she is in New York, in our box at the opera, showing off her earrings and pretending to listen to *Der Freischütz*. — There; I take it you're satisfied now, Mr. Curiosity?

As these words were being spoken, Edison was watching Lord Ewald with a particular measure of attention. At first he made no answer at all; but, his face growing suddenly darker, he seemed to be burying himself in a secret thought.

— Yes, he murmured coldly, that would be a disaster, a real disaster, what you've told me.

And he stared out the window with a distracted air.

— Oh, Lord Ewald murmured, you can't even begin to understand the extent of it.

— My lord, Edison said after a moment, that is why you must tell me a little more.

— Ah, indeed! And what good would that do?

— I have, now, another reason for inquiring.

— A reason?

— Yes; I think I have, perhaps, *a means to cure you* — or, at the least . . .

— Alas, it's impossible, said Lord Ewald with a bitter smile. Science has no power in these areas.

— Science? I am a man who knows nothing, guesses sometimes, finds frequently, and who's always amazed.

— Besides, the love from which I suffer is of a quality that is bound to seem strange and even unthinkable.

— So much the better! So much the better, said Edison, opening his eyes wider and wider. But just give me a few details.



— But, but . . . I have reason to think they may be *unintelligible*, even to you.

— *Unintelligible!*? Wasn't it Hegel who said, "We must understand the *Unintelligible* as such?" Let us make the attempt, my lord! cried the engineer; and you will see then what light we can shed on the dark focal point of your trouble. — If you refuse me now, well . . . wait and see . . . I'll pay you back with some secrecy of my own.

— Very well, here's the story, said Lord Ewald, warmed by Edison's cordial informality.

## CHAPTER XII

### Alicia

*She walks in beauty, like the night*

*Of cloudless climes and starry skies.*

— Byron, *Hebrew Melodies*

Lord Ewald, crossing his legs and puffing gently on his cigar, began his story.

— For some years now, I've been living on one of the oldest estates of my family, Castle Athelwold in Staffordshire. It's a bleak and foggy district, and the castle, one of the last, is surrounded by lakes, pine forests, and craggy hills, some miles from Newcastle-under-Lyme. Since my return from Abyssinia, I've been living a solitary existence there, for I have no living relatives, and feeling quite content with the society of our old retainers, who've been in the family for years.

Once I had done my military service, I assumed the privilege of living in this way, according to my tastes. A number of different thoughts on the spirit of the age led me to renounce, very early, all thoughts of a political career; and a number of distant voyages developed my natural taste for solitude. So this isolated existence satisfied my instinct for meditation, and I thought myself the happiest of men.

One day, however, I had to leave my barony and my sport of hunting in order to go to London, to attend with my fellow peers a celebration of the anniversary of our sovereign's coronation as Empress of the Indies. A foolish and commonplace accident on this trip joined me with another person who was also going to London for the celebration. How did it happen? This is the story. At Newcastle Station, the railroad carriages proved to be full. On the platform was a young lady who seemed greatly distressed at being unable to board the train. At the last min-



ute she approached me, a total stranger, hardly daring to ask for room in the compartment in which I was traveling alone; and of course this was a favor I could hardly refuse her.

Here, my dear Edison, let me remark that until this point the occasions for what people call worldly intimacies had always presented themselves to me in vain.

A certain unsociability in my nature had always held me back from any sort of good fortune of that character. If I never had a fiancée, it was part of my inner nature not to want or desire, even for an instant, any other woman than the one special person, still unknown, but destined perhaps to become my wife.

In a most old-fashioned way, I took conjugal love very seriously indeed. Those of my friends who didn't share my peculiar point of view on this matter used to surprise me; and even today I really pity the young men who under various dubious pretexts betray *in advance* the woman whom one day they will marry. Hence that reputation for coldness which my friends spread about me, even as far as the household of the queen, after they had vainly tried to excite my interest in Russian women, Italians, or creoles.

Well, in any case, this is what happened: within a few hours I became passionately attached to this young lady in the railway carriage, whom I was seeing for the first time. By the time of our arrival in London, without even being aware of it, I was caught up in that first and no doubt last love affair which is traditional in our family. Within a few days, to put it in a word, intimate bonds had been established between us. They have lasted to this day.

Since you choose to act at this moment as a mysterious doctor from whom nothing must be hidden, it becomes essential to my story to describe, physically, Miss Alicia Clary. I shall not try to avoid expressing myself as a lover, and even, if possible, as a poet, seeing that this woman, even in the eyes of the most disinterested artist, would appear to be beautiful beyond any question and in the highest degree.

Miss Alicia is about twenty years old, and slim as a silver aspen. Her gestures are gently and deliciously harmonious; her body is molded in lines to delight and surprise the greatest sculptors. Her figure is full, but with the pale glow of lilies; she has indeed the splendor of a *Venus Victorious*, but humanized. Her masses of brown tresses have the brilliance of a southern night. Often, as she leaves the bath, she treads on this glittering cascade of hair, which doesn't lose its curls even in the water, and throws its shadowy luxury about her shoulders like the mantle of a cloak. Her face forms the most seductive oval, within which her cruel



mouth flowers like a blood red rosebud. Her lips glow with fresh color as they draw back in a laugh to display the gleaming teeth of a young animal. Her eyebrows are alive with shadows, the lobes of her charming ears are fresh as April roses. Her nose, exquisitely straight, with translucent wings, continues perfectly the line of her forehead. Her hands are more pagan than aristocratic; her feet have the same elegance as those of Greek statues. And her features are lit by a pair of lofty eyes, dark of hue, and mysteriously penetrating behind her lashes. From this human flower rises a warm perfume that surrounds one and pervades the air, burning, intoxicating, ravishing. When she speaks, the resonance of Miss Alicia's voice is so penetrating, the notes of her singing are so vibrant and so profound, that whether she is reciting a tragic passage in noble verses or singing some magnificent aria, I am always amazed to find myself trembling with an admiration the like of which, as you shall see, I've never known before.

### CHAPTER XIII

## Shadows

*A nothing . . .*

— A common phrase

— While we were at London and during the court celebrations, the most radiant young girls in our nest of English swans passed unperceived before me. Everything that was not the presence of Alicia became painful to me: I was overwhelmed.

And yet, even during those first days, I was struggling vainly against an overwhelming impression that the young lady made on me, from which I could not escape. I tried to discredit the judgments that her words and acts forced upon me every instant we were together. I accused myself of stupidity rather than admit what they meant, and I had recourse to all the devices of rationalization in order to destroy the evidence of my own thought. A woman! Isn't she just a child, troubled by a thousand anxieties, subject to influence from every direction? Shouldn't we welcome with the most gentle and friendly of smiles any evidence of her fantastic imaginings, of her changing tastes in trifles, alterations as swift as the flutter of a feather? This constant variation is part of woman's charm. A natural instinct is bound to lead us gently to correct, to modify by a thousand slow transitions (for which she will love us all the more, sensing their operation), to guide, in a word, this frail,



irresponsible, and delicate creature, who spontaneously and naturally demands our support. — Well, then, I asked myself, did it make sense to judge so swiftly and unreservedly a creature whose thoughts might soon be changed by love (and this depended on me) until they became the reflection of my own?

Certainly I said all that to myself! And yet I could not forget that in every living creature there is an unchanging, essential base that imprints on all the ideas, however subtle, on all the impressions, whether changing or stable, or such a being, a certain aspect, color, quality, or *character*, in a word. And whatever *exterior* modifications they may undergo, these are the fixed qualities of such a creature's experience and thought. Let us call this substratum the *soul*, if you will.

But between the body and the soul of Miss Alicia, it wasn't just a disproportion that distressed and upset my understanding; it was an absolute *disparity*.

At this word of Lord Ewald's one might have noted that Edison's features suddenly turned pale. He made a gesture and shot a glance of surprise, maybe even of stupefaction. But he ventured not a word of interruption.

— It amounted to this, the young lord continued. The traits of her divine beauty seemed to be foreign to her *self*; her words seemed constrained and out of place in her mouth. Her intimate being was in flat contradiction with the form it inhabited. You would have thought, not only that her personality was deprived of what I think philosophers call plastic mediation, but that she had been shut up, by a kind of magical punishment, in the perpetual contradiction of her beautiful body. From time to time the experience (which I'll try to convey to you in a moment by an account of specific facts) was so completely evident that I came to consider it, I'd almost say, unquestionable. Yes, on occasion I was tempted to think, *quite seriously*, that in the dark spaces of Becoming this woman had somehow strayed by accident into this body, which did not belong to her at all.

— It's an unnecessary hypothesis, Edison replied. Still, almost all women — while they are beautiful, which isn't for long — give one similar sensations, above all when one is in love for the first time.

— If you'll just be good enough to wait a moment, said Lord Ewald, you will see that the case was much more complicated than that, and that Miss Alicia Clary could properly assume in my eyes the strange proportions, if not of an absolute *novelty* in humankind, at least of one of the darker and more sinister human anomalies. As for the *duration* of beauty — let it be of the most radiant sort and pass in a flash, yet if I die



in that instant, won't that instant have been eternal for me? No matter how long beauty lasts, provided it has really made an appearance! And for the rest, am I not obliged to take fairly seriously an event that, in spite of the cold and skeptical indifference of my reason, confounds all at once my understanding, my senses, and my heart? Believe me, my dear doctor, I haven't come to your consulting room in order to describe to you, under the simpleminded supposition that my affliction is unique, some trivial case of hysterical dementia, more or less banal, such as one can find written up in all the medical textbooks. The case is of a much more astonishing order of physiological difficulty; you may take my word for that.

— Excuse me; would your grief perhaps spring from the fact that this handsome young person hasn't remained faithful to you?

— Would to God she were capable of infidelity! cried Lord Ewald. For then, I'd have no trouble, *since she would be another person!* Besides, the man guilty of having been betrayed in love has no right to complain of a fate he has deserved. What logic is that, to complain of a woman whom one hasn't been able to captivate a bit? The truth of this thought, instinctively and generally recognized, is what always colors with a certain absurdity the complaints of unfortunate husbands. You must believe that if a shadowy imagination, a momentary caprice of desire, had ever turned Miss Alicia Clary away from our mutual fidelity, I would have encouraged that inconstancy by viewing it with the most lofty inattention. On the contrary, it is clear that she accords me the *only love of which she is capable*, and I believe it is all the more "sincere," alas, because she feels it IN SPITE OF HERSELF.

— Would you be good enough, my lord, said Edison, to take up the story of this adventure in logical order, starting at the point where I interrupted?

— After several evenings, I learned from this new friend of mine that she was from a fairly good Scottish family, which had even risen to the nobility in these latter days. Seduced by a fiancé, then cast aside in favor of a fortune, Alicia had just left her father's house; she proposed to lead the independent, nomadic existence of a singer — an idea that she would later give up. Her voice, her appearance, her dramatic talent, all assured her — or so several people had solemnly told her — that she could easily make enough to meet her modest needs. As for her encounter with me, in the first moments of her flight from home, she thought herself extremely lucky. Since she could no longer be married, but felt a certain sympathy for my person, she accepted without further demands the love I pressed on her, and declared herself hopeful of soon being able to share my inclination.



— All things considered, Edison remarked, these declarations indicate a certain dignity of the heart, I imagine? Yes? . . . Or no?

Lord Ewald gazed on him, impassive, expressionless.

You would have thought he was touching on the most painful point of his entire melancholy confession.

## CHAPTER XIV

### How Substance Changes with Form

The same idea . . . maybe:

*Those who are absent are always wrong.*

— Wisdom of the world

*You have devoted friends: still . . . if you turn your back?*

— Goethe

Without altering his tone of voice, he continued impassively:

— Yes; but — what you've heard was my translation, not the precise words of Alicia.

Another style, a different set of sentiments; and I see clearly that I must set before you the *text* itself. Substituting one's own style for that of a person whose character one is explaining, on the pretext that it's *pretty well* expressed that way, is putting the listener in the position of a night wanderer on the highway, who thinks he's petting a dog when really he's enraging a wolf.

Here, then, are her *exact* words:

— The man who betrayed her was nothing but a petty manufacturer, who never held any attraction for her apart from his money.

She never loved him, no, certainly not. She yielded to his importunities, thinking thereby to hasten her marriage with him; it was only to escape from her existence as an unmarried daughter that she resigned herself to him; this husband would be no worse than another. Besides, he promised to cut a decent figure in the world. But girls are bad judges in these things. Next time she'd know better than to believe in fine phrases. For example, it was very lucky that she hadn't had a baby. If her first adventure had been kept secret, she might have undertaken to *establish herself* with another lover.

But in her home town, her own family had, by a stupid kind of idiocy most likely, spread the word abroad. She had been so angry at that, she decided to run away. Not knowing what else to do, she set her eye on the stage. Hence her trip to London, where the little bit of money



she had saved would enable her to look for a good engagement. In the end, no doubt, such a career was bad for a girl's reputation; but since she had already committed the most serious fault of all, why should she be careful anymore, on that subject at least? Besides, she would assume a stage name, so she would. Some very competent people had told her that her voice was fine, her figure good, and that she *represented* well, so she expected to meet with "some success." Then, when one has some money, other things can be arranged. When she had enough put aside, she would leave "the boards," take up a trade no doubt, get married, and would live HONORABLY. Meanwhile, she felt a real liking for me: — what a difference! She saw now that she was dealing with a "great lord." Besides, I was a gentleman — that "said it all."

*Et cetera*; I'll spare you the rest for now.

What do you think of Miss Alicia after this version?

— The devil! said Edison. The two stories make such different impressions that her words and your translation of them seem to have said *two* entirely different things with only a fictive rapport between them.

There was a moment of silence.

## CHAPTER XV

### Analysis

*Hercules entered the lair of the wild Erymanthean boar, seized the great beast by the neck, and, dragging him out of those shadows, brought forth by main force under the blinding rays of the sun, the muddy snout of the stunned monster.*

— Greek mythology

— Well then, continued Lord Ewald impassively, this was the train of my thought, when I had finished studying the fundamental import of this collection of phrases.

— This seems to be it, I said to myself. A young woman as luminously beautiful as this one seems to be wholly unaware of the mysterious extent to which her body fulfills the absolute ideal of human perfection. It's simply as a matter of business, of *trade*, that her theatrical training enables her to interpret the inspirations of genius into mimic gestures; those inspirations themselves she finds *hollow*. These immense, these unique spiritual realities, real at least for all sensitive souls — she calls them, with a vague smile, mere "*poetry*," "*airy nothings*." It's with a blush, it's by subduing her real self, that she's able to



listen to them, and to *lower herself* (as one does to children's games) to the point of interpreting them.

If she were rich, her talent would be nothing but a source of amusement for her — a little less interesting, you might say, than a game of cards. That voice, which lays its golden enchantment on every syllable, is nothing but an empty instrument: she sees it as a way of making a living *less WORTHY than any other*. She uses it for lack of any other talent, and as if impatient to abandon it (after she's got an easy fortune out of it). The divine illusion of glory, the enthusiasm, the noble excitement of the audience, are nothing for her but an infatuation of people with nothing else to do, people for whom she thinks the great artists serve simply as "toys."

What this woman regrets in her fault, far from being honor itself (which for her is simply a superannuated abstraction), is simply the profit that can be made on this capital, if it's prudently preserved.

She goes so far as to calculate the profits to be made from her fraudulent virginity if the story of her double dealing had remained unknown in her home. She has no sense at all that regrets of this nature constitute the only real dishonor, far more serious than a mere external accident of the flesh. For anyone who defines herself in such a way, that accident is an *inevitable* fatality, written in her temperament from the moment she lay in her cradle.

Her total ignorance of the real nature of what she pretends or supposes she's lost renders absolutely INSIGNIFICANT, in a word, the meaning of this physical circumstance, either one way or the other.

When, then, was this girl actually deflowered? Was it before or after the physical event? Isn't she in fact bragging even when she talks about her "fall," since her manner of deploring this supposed fall is more impure than the fault itself? And as for her virginity, I say she never had anything to lose in this respect except a kind of nothingness, since she doesn't even have the excuse of having been in love.

Not having the faintest perception of the enormous gap that separates an abused virgin from a cheated prostitute, she confuses a simple physiological event with dishonor. She takes this event in the purely exterior and secondary sense as one that all the proprieties and conventions of society have forever, and as it were mechanically, proscribed.

For after all, suppose a girl to be seduced. If, considering her honor lost, she regretted *nothing but Honor alone*, wouldn't she be infinitely more admirable, morally, than those millions of "pure" women *who remain so only OUT OF SELF-INTEREST?*

She thus places herself within the immense crowd of women whose



careful calculations relate to honor as caricature does to a human face — women who would cheerfully define honor as “a sort of luxury that only the rich can afford, but that other people can always buy when they have the price.” What this signifies is simply that their own honor was always up for bids, however loudly they protested to the contrary. Such ladies instantly recognize one another by their language and will say to one another with a sigh when they hear of some unfortunate, “What a shame the poor child *turned out* so badly!” Alicia, you may be sure, would know how to attract this sort of monstrous compassion, and would even be secretly flattered by it — the reproach amounting, with a conscience of this sort, to nothing more than having been an inexperienced dupe, having made a bad bargain as a result of insufficient practice.

She lacks a sense of shame to the point where she made me listen to things like this. Not one last remnant of feminine tact warns her that, simply from the point of view of calculated self-interest, she is erasing from my soul all traces of sympathy, all admiration for her! Her moral clumsiness is like ice on my heart. How can it be? This stunning beauty is the habitation of such appalling moral misery! I cannot understand it. In a word, this woman is of such a cynical candor, and so unconscious of it, that I can express my disdain only by leaving her — since, as I’ve said, I’m not one of those who can submit to accepting a body while rejecting the soul.

A natural response would thus have been to give her a thousand guineas, which would have rendered her quite indifferent to the eternal farewell that accompanied them.

## CHAPTER XVI

### Hypothesis

*O thou! . . . etc. . . .*

— The poets

— Accordingly, I was about to renounce Miss Alicia and give her up on the spot, Lord Ewald continued, when a sudden misgiving caused me to hesitate. When Alicia stopped talking, her face, no longer clouded by the shadow rising from her silly and dishonest words, her features, I say, like those of a marble divinity, remained a flat contradiction of her previous speech.

With a person who was very beautiful, but in the range of *ordinary*



perfections, I might not have felt this inexplicable sensation that I experienced with Miss Alicia Clary. With some other person, a trifle, a mere glance — the expression of her features, the stiffness of her hair, the texture of her skin, the movement of her hands, anything of that sort might have reminded me of her hidden nature. A thousand imperceptible signs! And I would have . . . recognized her identity with her *self*!

But, here, let me tell you again, the *noncorrespondence* of the physical and the intellectual made itself felt constantly, and in the proportions of a paradox. Her beauty, I assure you, was beyond reproach, defying the subtlest analysis. From the outside, and from the brow to the feet, a sort of Venus Anadyomene; within, a personality absolutely FOREIGN to this body. Imagine, if you will, this abstraction brought to life: a bourgeois Goddess.

I came thus to believe that all the laws of physiology had been overturned in this living hybrid — or else, just possibly, that I was in the presence of a being whose grief and pride had overflowed all measure, and who deliberately denied her own nature in a spirit of ultimate bitterness, absolute disdain. In a word, it seemed to me impossible to understand this woman without attributing to her some sort of lyric sentimentalism like the following.

Lord Ewald, after collecting himself for a moment, continued:

— While still trembling from the terrible, frightful, irreparable wrong that had been done her — she hardened her soul to that mood of icy scorn which the first experience of betrayal engenders in noble minds. A mistrust so black that some people never recover from it led her to conceal a devastating irony behind that blank exterior on the assumption that no man could possibly conceive the depths of her despair.

She must have said to herself: — Since the appetite for mere sensations seems to have destroyed every noble sentiment among these new human beings (whose faces are all turned to the ground like beasts, but among whom I see I have to exist for a little while), this young man who talks to me of tenderness and divine passion must be exactly like the other ephemeral creatures of the age. He's bound to think on the same level as the others who've taken refuge in mere sensualism and think they can measure every grief with an empty sarcasm — too concerned with trying to live even to imagine that there may be griefs that are literally inconsolable. He says he loves me! Is anybody capable of loving anymore? The fevers of youth burn within him; an instant's pleasure will dissipate them. If I listened to him tonight, he would leave me tomorrow, more desolate than ever . . . No, no! Before I listen again to hope, wrapped as I still am in my first grief, let me take a little coun-



sel from that first bitter experience. First of all, I must make sure that he too isn't reciting a role for my benefit; since I don't expect to give anyone the right to smile at a grief from which I suffer through my entire being, and above all don't want my lover to suppose I've forgotten the past.

All I have left is my own integrity; let everything else perish rather than that. I must be unforgettable in the thought of that man who will be the chosen companion of my fallen grandeur. No, I will never deliver myself up to this new stranger, either in a kiss or by a word, until I am sure I can be received by him to whom I give myself. If his passionate words mask nothing but a trifling fancy — well, let him keep them along with those presents of his which I accept with careful indifference, only because I am wearied with his much too ingenious urgencies. I want to be loved as no one is loved these days! Not simply because of my beauty but because I understand my own misfortune.

All the rest is vanity. Like the marble divinity I resemble, my only duty is to make those who approach me feel (and forever, forever) how exceptional I am. To the task, then! I must be exactly like their women, the coarse average women who pass in the street. Let none of the light with which I was born ever gleam in my eyes! Let every word I speak be smeared over with mediocrity, with nullity! If you are an actress, let this be your first creation. Put on your mask; you play to an audience of yourself. If you are a superlative artist, here your triumph will be, not glory, but love. Assume that ignoble role in which most women of this century undertake to parody their own natures, under the pretext that FASHION constrains them to it.

This, then, will be the test. If he persists, in spite of that utter poverty of spirit which I will ruthlessly feign, if he still persists in his pretence of love, that will prove *he's no more worthy of me than of any other female*, and that I represent to his appetites nothing but a sum of pleasures, nothing but a momentary intoxication like that of wine — and, in short, that *if he really knew my essential nature, he would consider it ridiculous*.

Then I would say to him: Off with you, go to one of those other women, the only sort you can love, those who are dead to all feeling for another destiny. Be gone!

If, on the other hand, he were to leave me, without even trying to capture my real self — if he goes off in despair, he too, but without even having had the idea of profaning the dream that I will have inspired in him, that he will never lose — then, at that sign, I will recognize *that he is of my country!* I will sense that indefinite quality which is the only



serious thing on earth, it will appear in his eyes, wet with sacred tears! I will know that he merits all my devotion, and a few moments then will suffice to raise us — ah, to the seventh heaven!

Meanwhile, if the test reveals in him the lie I suspect, if I see myself condemned to solitude, well, so be it, welcome solitude! And already I feel myself revived by voices more splendid than those of the senses and the heart. I shall be betrayed no more! Art alone erases the past and liberates me for the future. Dismissing, therefore, those *so-called real* attachments to the earth, I shall transcend myself without the least regret into those undying imaginary beings created by Genius, and bring them to life with my mysterious song. They will be my only companions, my only friends, my only sisters. And then perhaps some great poet will appear, as there was for Maria Malibran, who will immortalize my beauty, my voice, my soul, my ashes! Thus I shall bury my grief in the light and disappear into those regions of the Ideal to which the insults of humanity can never attain.

— Deuce take it! said Edison.

— Yes, resumed Lord Ewald, such was the *impossible* inner life with which, in an effort to understand this woman, I tried to endow her. You see now that, to be worthy of such an inner life, she must have been prodigiously, amazingly beautiful, don't you?

— In fact, my friend, you make clear to me that a lord may well be called Byron! Edison replied with a smile. And you must take disillusion remarkably hard if you resorted to all this impractical poetry rather than admit the banal reality. Come now, isn't this bundle of sentiment the stuff of grand opera? What woman could ever think it all up, outside of the few last mystics? One doesn't run a fever of this sort except for a deity.

— My dear and subtle confidant, I recognized, myself, though too late, that this was a sphinx without an enigma; I'm a dreamer who's already undergone his punishment.

— But, said Edison, why are you still in love with her, after analyzing her to this point?

— Ah, because waking up doesn't always bring with it forgetfulness of the dream, and man shackles himself with links of his own imaginings! Lord Ewald replied. This is what happened.

Lost in the fantasy with which I enwreathed my love, she and I soon belonged to one another. Then, what evidence was necessary to prove to me that the actress . . . *wasn't really acting!* The day when I finally recognized this fact irrevocably, I resolved at once to free myself of this phantom. But the bonds of Beauty are strong and deep. I was ignorant



of their *intrinsic* power, when, falling victim to my own fantasy, I ventured into this passion. They had already sunk deep into my flesh when, disillusioned forever, I tried to shake them off. I woke up, a little like Gulliver in Lilliput, held down by a million strings. Then I felt myself lost indeed. Burned by the embraces of Alicia, my native energies had weakened. During my long sleep, Delilah had cut off my hair. Through weariness I gave in. Rather than abandon the body, like a man of courage, I shrouded my soul; I fell silent.

Never has she suspected the transports of hideous rage that have coursed through my veins on her account. How many times have I come close to destroying both her and myself! A forbidden indulgence, a mere mirage, has thus linked me helplessly to this marvelous dead shape! Alas! Miss Alicia now represents for me nothing but a habitual presence, and I swear to God that it would be impossible for me to possess her.

At this speech, at the light that gleamed in the young man's eyes as he pronounced the last phrase, Edison gave a mysterious start. But he remained silent.

— Thus it is, Lord Ewald concluded, that she and I exist together yet at the same time are separated.

## CHAPTER XVII

### Dissection

*Fools are unpardonable for this, that they render men indulgent to evil.*

— Jean Marras

Lord Ewald had fallen silent.

— Would you be good enough, my lord, to define a few points for me? Everything here bears on a few subtleties, which are in themselves of some interest. For example: Miss Alicia Clary wouldn't be a . . . a *stupid* woman, would she?

— Certainly not, Lord Ewald responded with a melancholy smile. There's not a trace in her of that almost sacred stupidity which, because it's an extreme, has become almost as rare as intelligence. A woman who's lost all her stupidity — can she be anything but a monster? What could be more depressing, more debilitating, than that hateful creature they call a "clever woman" — unless, perhaps, it's her counterpart, the man who "talks well"? Cleverness, in the social sense, is always the



enemy of intelligence. Wouldn't you agree that a collected, believing, modest, and slightly *stupid* woman, who with her marvelous instinct divines the sense of a phrase as if through a veil of light, is a supreme treasure and a true companion, to exactly the same extent that the other woman is an antisocial scourge?

Miss Alicia, now, like every other mediocre being, is far from being *stupid*. She's simply *foolish*. Her dream would be to appear before the world as a "clever woman," because of the "brilliant" reputation, the special advantages, that she thinks such a reputation would give her.

This uncanny housewife would enjoy the mask of a clever woman like a new hairdo, as an agreeable way to pass the time, but she would think it not very *serious*. And thus she would find a way to remain mediocre, even in her pursuit of this flat and perverted ideal.

— What form does her foolishness take in everyday life? Edison asked.

— She is afflicted, replied Lord Ewald, with that form of pretended good sense which is negative and derisive, which cuts everything down as far as possible, which comments only on the most insignificant realities, those which the devotees of this manner call *down-to-earth*. As if real living people could possibly devote their entire lives to such boring and obvious considerations about which we can reach agreement with an absolute minimum of speech!

There's a deep but hidden correspondence between certain people and these inferior things, a kind of reciprocal attraction or instinctive magnetism that draws them together. One calls to the other, they are attracted, they draw together, and mingle. From this sort of commerce they get no sustenance; on the contrary, those who engage in it rot inwardly and perish of the natural vulgarity in which they smother. From the physiological point of view, these cases of inept positivism, which are becoming so common nowadays, are nothing but bizarre forms of hypochondria. It's a variety of mental disorder which leads the victims to repeat, even in their sleep, "important"-sounding words, which seem to give "weight" and substance to life *simply by being repeated*. For example, the words "*serious! positive! good sense!*" and so forth, when repeated *at random*, without any particular application. Our maniacs imagine, and sometimes rightly, that the simple articulation of these syllables confers on anyone who enunciates them a certificate of mental capacity. So that they soon acquire the lucrative and mechanical habit of continually pronouncing these vocables — and, before long, this practice steeps them thoroughly in the mindless hysteria with which the words are soaked. The most astonishing thing is that they then acquire



dupes of their own, succeed in gaining official power in different states, when in fact their smug, smiling, silent nullity merits nothing but the asylum. Well, then, the soul of this woman whom I love, alas! is twin sister to those I've described. In everyday life, Miss Alicia is the Goddess Reason.

— Good! said Edison. Next step. If I've understood you correctly, Miss Alicia is not a *pretty* woman?

— Certainly not! said Lord Ewald. Believe me, if she was nothing but the prettiest of women I wouldn't pay so much attention to her, not for a minute. You know the saying: Love of the beautiful is horror of the pretty. Just a moment ago I spontaneously tried to give you an idea of her by recalling the stunning form of *Venus Victorious*. Well, a simple question: Any man who found the *Venus Victorious* to be "pretty" wouldn't be intelligible, would he? Any human creature capable of sustaining, even for an instant, the weight of serious comparison with such a statue couldn't possibly evoke in any healthy mind the sort of impression that's left by the sight of what we call a "pretty woman." In the qualities that are really at issue here, she's as much her contrary as the most hideous of the Eumenides. You could arrange their three types at the apexes of an isosceles triangle.

The only misfortune that has befallen Miss Alicia is thought! . . . If she were deprived of all thought, I could understand her. The marble *Venus*, in fact, *has nothing to do with thinking*. The goddess is veiled in stone and silence. From her appearance comes this word: "I am Beauty, complete and alone. I speak only through the spirit of him who looks at me. In my absolute simplicity all thought defeats itself since it loses its limits. All thoughts sink together in me, confused, indistinct, identical, like the ripples on rivers as they enter the sea. For him who reflects me, I *am* the deeper character he assigns me."

This meaning of the statue, which *Venus Victorious* expresses with her contours, Miss Alicia Clary, standing on the sand beside the ocean, might inspire as her model — if she kept her mouth shut and closed her eyes. But how to understand a *Venus Victorious* who has found her arms again in the dark night of time, and reappears in the middle of the human race — only to bend on the devoted world come to pay her its passionate homage that dull, sly, crafty eye of a would-be matron, whose mind is nothing but the marketplace where all the ghosts of that false common sense we just denounced assemble solemnly to perform their boring chaffer?

— Good, said Edison. Next question. Miss Alicia is not an *artist*, is she?

— My God! cried Lord Ewald. I should say not. Didn't I tell you she



was a performer, a virtuoso? And isn't a virtuoso the direct and mortal enemy of Genius, and so, by direct consequence, of Art itself?

Art, as you know, has no more connection with virtuosity than Genius has with Talent; the differences are, in fact, beyond all measurement.

The only living souls who deserve the name of Artists are the creators, those who awaken impressions that are immense, unknown, and sublime. The others? . . . who cares? The followers and imitators may pass; but these virtuosos who come to pretty up, but really to enfeeble, the divine work of Genius? There are wretches in the art of music, for example, whose whole talent is to "weave a thousand variations," a "set of brilliant fantasies" till the Last Judgment sounds. What a stench of monkeys! Haven't you sometimes seen one of these types after a long concert run two fingers through his long hair and gaze mournfully up at the ceiling as evidence of his inspiration? Such puppets make one feel ashamed; they seem to have souls only metaphorically, as we speak of the soul of a violin. — Well, that's the sort of soul Miss Alicia has! . . . But, being essentially mediocre, she lacks even that bastard instinct which makes the virtuosos think that Music is beautiful — though they have less right to say so than the deafest of the deaf. But she, when she talks of her supernatural voice, of her delicate inflections, of the shadings and timbres of her song, she says she has "a gift for pleasing." She thinks people a little "crazy" to be interested in such things. Enthusiasm always stirs her to a bit of pity, because she thinks it inappropriate for *people of distinction*. And in this way, as you observe, she has found a way to refine on the foolishness and complacency even of the virtuosos. When she herself sings, thanks to various requests on my part (for singing bores her, being nothing but *drudgery at a trade for which she was never intended, alas!*), — she often stops suddenly, if admiration makes me close my eyes, to say "that she *really doesn't understand how a gentleman can get so excited over these airy nothings* when he should be thinking of the *dignity befitting his station in life!*" You see: it's a simple case of mental rickets.

— She isn't a *good* woman? Edison asked.

— How could she be, since she's a fool? said Lord Ewald. One's only good when one's stupid. Oh, I could have understood a criminal, a vicious, a sinister person, with the depraved tastes of a Roman empress — yes, and preferred such a character a thousand times over. But, without being good, she has none of these wild appetites, born at least from a deep sense of pride. Good, you ask? No. Not the least trace in her of that sublime goodness which transfigures all ugliness and lays its blessed balm on every wound.



Mediocre above all, she's not even wicked; she's silly in her goodness, as she's niggardly rather than miserly; always foolishly, never stupidly. She has that instinctive hypocrisy of hearts that are weak and dry as punkwood, so that she's no more worthy of the kindnesses she renders than of those she receives. When a kindness is done out of foolish sentimentality, doesn't that double one's sense of its bitter irrelevance? Listen, my dear Edison: one evening at the theater I was watching Miss Alicia Clary while we were attending some melodrama or other, sprung from the pen of one of those phrase forgers, one of those literary brigands who with their jargon-mongering and their banal fictions, their stale jests and grimaces, murder in their audiences all sense of moral elevation — much to their own self-satisfaction and profit! Well, I watched the admirable eyes of this woman fill with tears as a result of the abject dialogue on stage! And I watched her weep as one would watch rain fall. Morally speaking, I would have preferred raindrops; but physically — there's no denying it, even if one would — even such tears as those, on those cheeks, were splendid. Diamonds bathed in light, they rolled down that sublime, pale face, behind which, nevertheless, there was nothing but empty-headed foolishness in a slight state of agitation! So that in the end I could only admire gloomily this simpleminded exudation of animality.

— Excellent, said Edison. Miss Alicia, I take it, is not without some sort of religious affiliation?

— Not at all, said Lord Ewald. I rather indulged myself in analyzing the religiosity of this disturbing woman. She is a believer — not through the revivifying love of a Divine Redeemer, but because that's the conventional thing, very much "the thing to be." When she comes from church on Sunday morning, the way she holds her prayer book quite resembles on another level the way she tells me "that I'm a gentleman"; the implications of it make me blush. And so she believes in a God of enlightened and comprehensible sublimity. She populates her paradise with martyrs who never exaggerate anything, with the Respectable Elect, with saints on their best behavior, with practical virgins and sensible cherubim. She believes in heaven, but a heaven of rational dimensions! — Her ideal would be a completely *down-to-earth* heaven, for the sun itself seems to her too much "in the clouds," too airy and abstract.

She finds the phenomenon of death very shocking; it is an excess that she doesn't quite understand — "not quite the way we do things nowadays." That's about the sum of her religious ideas. To conclude, what's disconcerting in her is the fact of that almost superhuman beauty covering as with a sacred veil that character of dull moderation, that



vulgarity of mind, that exclusive and almost feeble-minded consideration for nothing but the *exterior* values attached to Wealth, Faith, Love, and Art — that is, for nothing but what is vain and illusory in them. It is this shrinking of the spirit, in a word, which recalls the results obtained by the natives who live by the banks of the Orinoco when they bind the skulls of their children between boards to keep them from ever being able to think of things that are too lofty. Clothe this basic character in a measure of placid complacency, and you have a more or less just impression of the character of Miss Alicia Clary.

After a silence, Lord Ewald continued. — I say, then, that the simple spectacle of this woman has killed my joy. When I look at her and listen to her, she gives me the sensation of a temple profaned, not by rebellion, impiety, and barbarism with their bloody torches, but by greedy ostentation, timid hypocrisy, empty and mechanical fidelity, unconscious coldness of heart, a superstition of unbelief — and, in addition, by the renegade priestess of the temple itself. For her, the goddess of the temple is beneath blasphemy, hardly worth a smile; and yet she continues to recite the empty legend to me, interminably, and always in the same flat, complacent tone of voice.

— Before we conclude, said Edison, didn't you tell me that, in spite of her lack of vibrations, she was a girl of good family?

An imperceptible flush rose in the cheeks of Lord Ewald at these words.

— I? I don't recall saying any such thing; he replied.

— You said that Miss Alicia Clary belonged "to some good family of Scottish origin, recently ennobled."

— Ah, to be sure, said Lord Ewald. But that's another matter. It's not even a form of praise; on the contrary. In this century, one must *be* — or be *born* — noble; the days are long gone when one could *become* so. Nobility is conferred in our countries, nowadays, with a grimace. And we think it can only be harmful to certain bloodlines, strong though they may be to start with, if they are inoculated carelessly with this dubious and feeble vaccine, which has done nothing but poison so many confirmed and unshakable bourgeois.

And, as if sunk in secret reflections, he added very softly, with a grave smile:

— Perhaps that's even the *cause* of it, after all.

Edison, with the aristocracy of his genius (a kind of quite special nobility that will always humiliate the egalitarians), replied smilingly:

— The fact is, one doesn't become a racehorse simply by making an appearance at the track. Only, the most remarkable thing that results from all this analysis is that you don't perceive that this woman *would*



*be the absolute feminine Ideal for three-quarters of modern Humanity!* Ah, what a pleasant existence any one of a million men would lead with such a mistress, given that he were rich, handsome, and young like you!

— It's killing me, said Lord Ewald as if to himself. And, on your analogy, perhaps that's what constitutes the difference between a thoroughbred and a plow-horse.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### Confrontation

*Under his heavy hood of lead, the sinner spoke but this one word: "I can no more!"*

— Dante, *Inferno*

Abruptly Lord Ewald cried out, yielding to some youthful aggravation he had hitherto repressed:

— Ah! Who will deliver this soul out of this body for me? You would think she was some dreadful mistake of the Creator's! I never supposed my heart would be locked in the pillory of this freak. Did I ever ask for so much beauty at the price of so much misery? Never. I'm entitled to complain. A girl with a simple, natural heart, with lively features, lit by warm and honest eyes — I would have accepted life with her; I wouldn't have wearied my spirit over her. I would have loved her in all simplicity and directness, as people do. — But this woman! . . . Ah, there's no cure for it. What right does anyone so beautiful have to be so devoid of spirit? By what right is this unparalleled form able to appeal at the deepest level of my spirit to some sublime emotion — only to destroy my faith in it? My eyes are constantly imploring her, "Betray me if you will, but exist! Live up to the *spirit of your own beauty!*" — and she never understands me. It is as if a God were to appear in person before a worshiper in the act of invocation, his spirit full of adoration, fervor, and ecstasy; and the God, bending down to his worshiper, would say gently to him, "I do not exist." Such an event would be no more incomprehensible to me than is this woman.

I'm not a lover, I'm a prisoner; my despair is limitless. The pleasures that this living morbus has accorded me were more bitter than death itself. Her kiss rouses me to nothing but thoughts of suicide. Indeed, that is the only way out for me now.

Lord Ewald, relaxing from his paroxysm of grief, finally resumed his normal tone.



— We traveled. Thoughts and feelings change sometimes as one crosses the frontiers. I don't know exactly what I had hoped for; a surprise of some sort, a healthful diversion. Though she never knew it, I was treating her like an invalid.

Well, neither Germany nor Italy, neither the steppes of Russia nor the splendors of Spain nor the beauties of youthful America could stir or distract or interest this mysterious creature. She looked with a jealous eye on the masterpieces of art, which she thought deprived her for a moment of my total attention; she never understood that she herself constituted a part of the beauty of these masterpieces, and that they were so many mirrors that I was setting before her.

In Switzerland, watching the sun rise on Monte Rosa, she cried (and with a smile quite as enchanting as that sunrise on the snow), "Ah, I don't really like mountains, they're so oppressive."

In Florence, before the marvels of the age of Leo X, she yawned discreetly and murmured, "Yes, it's all quite interesting, isn't it?"

In Germany, when she heard some Wagner, she said, "But there's no tune you can follow in all that music! It's quite *insane*!"

One of her tricks is to call anything that isn't simply silly or base "the stars."

So at every moment I hear her murmuring, in her divine voice, "Anything you choose, but, please, not *the stars*! You see for yourself, my lord, it's not *serious*."

That's her favorite formula, which she repeats mechanically, expressing in this simple refrain nothing but her native instinct to debase anything that rises above the humblest level of the earth.

"Love" is one of those words that have the power to make her smile, and I swear she would wink derisively at it if her sublime features answered to the grimace she makes in her soul — since she does apparently have a soul. And I have confirmed that she does have one, *in those rare and terrible instants when she seemed to have some dark instinctive fright of her own marvelous body*.

Once in Paris this extraordinary event took place. Questioning my own eyes, unsure of my reason, I got the idea — sacrilegious, even crazy, I agree — of confronting this living despondency with the great marble who is, as I told you, her image — the VENUS VICTORIOUS herself. I simply wanted to see what this insufferable woman would say in such a presence. One day, then, I took her, half-playfully, to the Louvre, telling her, "My dear Alicia, I'm going to give you a little surprise." We passed through the corridors, and I put her without further preparation in the presence of the eternal statue.



This time Miss Alicia raised her veil. She looked at the statue with a certain surprise; then, amazed, she cried aloud childishly:

— Look, it's ME!

The next moment, she added:

— Yes, but I have arms, and besides I'm more distinguished looking.

She shivered; her hand, which had dropped my arm to seek support from a railing, returned, and she said to me in an undertone:

— These stones . . . these walls . . . It's cold here; let's go away.

Once outdoors, as she still remained silent, I had some undefined expectation of an extraordinary word from her. And in fact I was not disappointed. Miss Alicia, still following out the train of her thought, drew me close and then said:

— *Well, if they spend all that money on this statue — then — I may be SUCCESSFUL too?*

I swear, her words made my head spin. Folly, inflated to celestial proportions, seemed to me like an eternal curse. Not knowing how to answer her, I bowed.

— I certainly hope so, I told her. And I took her home. That duty done, I returned to the Louvre.

I reentered the holy hall; and after a single glance at the Goddess, whose form contains the starry Night — ah, for the only time in my life, I felt my heart swell with one of the most mysterious sobs that ever stifled a mortal man.

So it is that this mistress, an animated dualism who repels and attracts me simultaneously, holds me to her by that very process, as the two poles of this magnet attract by their contradictory impulses a bit of steel.

Yet I am not capable by nature of submitting for long to the attractions (however powerful they may be) of one whom I half-despise. Love into which no sentiment enters, where no intelligence mingles with mere sensation, seems to me an insult to myself. My conscience cries out that such love is a prostitution of the heart. The bitter thoughts to which this *first love* has given rise have inspired me with a profound distaste for all women, and sunk me in the depths of an incurable melancholy.

My passion, which began as a craze for the figure, the voice, the perfume, and the EXTERIOR charm of this woman, has become absolutely platonic. Her moral being has forever frozen my senses: from now on they are merely remote. To think of her as mistress would *revolt* me nowadays. I am attached to her by nothing more than a kind of painful admiration. What I really would like would be to see Miss Alicia dead, if death didn't result in the effacing of all human features. In a word, the presence of her form, even as an illusion, would satisfy my stunned indif-



ference, since nothing can render this woman worthy of love.

In response to her pleas, I have decided to put her on the London stage — which means, in other words, *that I no longer care to live*.

For the moment, just to show myself that I wasn't completely useless on this earth, I have come to greet and shake your hand, before removing myself for good...

That is my story. You asked for it. You see there is no help for me. Your hand now, and farewell.

## CHAPTER XIX

### Remonstrations

*There's no way to repossess oneself from this trouble.*

— Montaigne

— My dear Count Ewald, said Edison slowly, what's all this? Over a woman? Or not even that; over such a woman! You? I feel as if I were dreaming!

— So do I, replied Lord Ewald with a sad and wintry smile. But just imagine. This woman was for me like one of those clear springs that in sunny countries rise in the shadows of ancient forests, exquisite in their murmurings. If, some summer day, you are carried away by the beauty of their deadly ripples and drop into them a leaf, still green and young and vital, it will be turned to stone when you take it out.

— You're right, said Edison thoughtfully. And as he watched the young man, he distinctly saw the thought of suicide moving through the deep, withdrawn gaze of Lord Ewald.

— My lord, he said, you've fallen prey to a youthful ailment that cures itself. Have you forgotten that everything, sooner or later, is forgotten?

— Oh, said Lord Ewald, replacing his monocle, do you take me for just another fickle fellow? My character and my inner nature are so formed that even as I recognize the absurdity of this "passion," I still remain subject to its enchantment, its power, its grief. I know where I've been hit. The wound is mortal. And now, my friend, since I've made my confession, let's say no more of it.

Edison raised his head and studied for a few moments this pale and, alas, too noble young man, as a surgeon studies a patient who's been declared incurable.

He reflected; he hesitated. You would have said he was assembling his thoughts and his energies for some strange, unimaginable project.



— Come now, he said, let's take stock. You are one of the most brilliant lords in Britain. You know there are companions for you who could light up every pleasure in life, girls of radiant beauty whose love is given but once and forever; yes, consecrated hearts, creatures of the rising sun and of ideal perfection. And on your part, my lord, you who are possessed of such a subtle intelligence, who have nobility, energy, wealth, any sort of splendid future you choose to pursue — here you are, without help or recourse against this woman. At a word, at a sign, thousands of others, just as handsome as this one, will spring up before you! Among them, there will be, let us say, a hundred charming creatures who will leave behind them nothing but happy thoughts and warm memories. And of that hundred, say, there will be ten with devoted hearts and flawless reputations; and among them, again, one woman to carry your name for life — for there is always one *Hypermnestra* among every fifty *Danaids*.

Thanks to this woman, if you look forward across thirty or forty years of expanding and exalted delight — the delights of every day — you can imagine yourself looking back over a really splendid life, leaving to England a sturdy stock of children, proud of your name and worthy of your blood. And you now, like a spoiled child, would reject this rich garner of delight that destiny offers you, and this future for which sons of Eve by the thousands would risk their lives or wear them out in endless struggles — you would throw away this heritage, abdicate your position, abandon existence, simply because of a passing female whom accident chose out of five million others exactly like her to destroy your future. You take this shadowy creature in all seriousness, though in a few years her memory will be for you like nothing so much as those black and stupefying smoke clouds that rise from the pipes of hashish smokers. Will you allow me to say it? If Miss Alicia Clary instinctively prefers the penny to the guinea, her influence seems to have been contagious for you — and that, let me say, is a real misfortune.

— My friend, replied Lord Ewald, don't be so hard on me, since I'm much harder on myself than you are, and to no avail.

— I'm speaking in the name of the young woman who will be your salvation, Edison persisted. To whom are you leaving her? One is responsible for the evil that flows from the good one has failed to do.

— I tell you again, I've thought of many others, Lord Ewald replied, but it's in my nature to love only once. In my family, if one is afflicted, one disappears, without condolences or discussions. That's it; we leave the "subtleties" and the "compromises" to other men.

Edison seemed to be measuring in his mind the extent of the disease.



— Yes, he murmured, as if to himself, it's a bad situation, it really is! The devil! What the devil!

Then, as if on a sudden impulse:

— My dear lord, he said, as I am perhaps the only doctor on earth who can do much for your care, I demand, in the name of my gratitude to you, a positive, definitive answer to this question. Once and for all, do you tell me that you can never consider this affair of yours — which is uncommon only for you — as one of those worldly incidents, passionate if you will, maybe even intense in its feelings, but without the slightest vital significance for you?

— Miss Alicia Clary may become tomorrow, and for many other men, an evening's diversion; that's perfectly possible. But as for me, I shall never recover. At life's deepest level, I see nothing but her form.

— Despising her as you do, you persist in immolating yourself on her beauty — quite idealistically it appears, since you have told me your feeling for her has become remote and frigid?

— Remote and frigid; yes, that's how it is, replied Lord Ewald. I feel no more desire for her. She is the radiant obsession of my spirit, that is all. I feel myself possessed by her, as the sorcerers of the Middle Ages used to say.

— You deliberately refuse to reenter the life of society, then?

— I do indeed, said Lord Ewald, rising from his chair. And on that note, my dear Edison, let me urge you to flourish, to enjoy your fame, to be useful to the human race! I must leave you. Achilles, they say, died of a wound in the heel. And now, for the last time, farewell. I have no right to waste in idle and personal chatter any more of those hours which are so precious for humanity.

So saying, Lord Ewald, still cool and collected, took up his hat, which he had placed over the barrel of a huge telescope by his side.

But Edison rose also.

— Come now, he cried, do you suppose I'm going to sit by and let you blow out your brains without trying to save your life, when I owe you my own life and everything that goes with it? Do you suppose I asked all those questions out of idle curiosity? My lord, you are one of those invalids who can only be cured with poison; I thought it my duty therefore to try all the arguments I could, before deciding to minister to you, if you agree, in a terrible and sinister manner; for your case is completely exceptional. The remedy consists of *fulfilling your wishes!* (Devil take me, the engineer murmured to himself, if I ever expected to make this first experiment with you as the subject!) Some characters and circumstances are bound to intersect; very likely I was actu-



ally expecting you this evening — without knowing it, of course. Well, now I see it all; I must try to save your existence. And as there are some wounds that one can heal only by deepening them and making them worse, *I want to fulfill your dream in its entirety!* My lord Ewald, didn't you cry out just now, when you were talking of *Her*, "Who will deliver this soul out of this body for me?"

— I did, murmured Lord Ewald, somewhat taken aback.

— All right, then! I'LL DO IT.

— You . . . you . . . how?

— But you, my lord, Edison interrupted in a tone of sharp solemnity. Never forget that in accomplishing your dark desire, I yield . . . only to Necessity.

## BOOK II

### THE PACT

#### CHAPTER I

#### White Magic

*Beware! By playing the phantom you become one!*

—Precept of the Kabbalah

The tone and glance with which the electrician accompanied these words made his listener tremble. He stared questioningly at the great man.

Was Edison in his right mind after all? What he had just suggested outstripped all understanding. The best thing would be to await further explanation.

Still, an irresistible magnetic force flowed from those last words of his. Lord Ewald felt it, despite himself, and sensed that some prodigious experience was about to be unveiled. Turning from Edison, he cast his eyes silently over the array of objects around him.

And under the eerie electric lights, which cast over everything a frightful pallor, these various objects, like monsters risen from a scientific underworld, assumed disturbing and startling aspects. The laboratory seemed, positively, a place of magic; within it, the natural could only be the extraordinary. Besides, Lord Ewald reflected, the greater part of his friend's discoveries were still unknown, and the paradoxical



quality of those he had heard about surrounded Edison in his eyes with a kind of intellectual halo within which the man himself appeared as at a diminished center.

For him, Edison was like an inhabitant of the distant kingdom of Electricity.

After some time he felt himself overcome by a complex of feelings, within which he could strangely distinguish curiosity, stupefaction, and a mysterious hope of something *New*. The vitality of his entire being seemed raised to new powers.

— It's a simple question, said Edison, of . . . *transubstantiation*. But I have a number of steps to take at once. — On the main point . . . do you accept?

— What you said was serious?

— Of course. Do you accept my offer?

— I do indeed; and I give you *carte blanche*, said Lord Ewald with a melancholy smile, already turning a little bitter.

— All right, said Edison, glancing at the electric clock over the doorway. I'll begin immediately, right? Time is precious, and I need three weeks.

— Is that all? I'll give you a month, said Lord Ewald.

— I don't need it; in matters of time I'm always on the dot. Let's say it's now eight twenty-five. At this very hour and this very place twenty-one days from today, Miss Alicia Clary will appear before you, not simply transfigured, not just made the most enchanting of companions, nor merely lifted to the most sublime level of spirituality, but actually endowed with a sort of immortality. In a word, the present gorgeous little fool will no longer be a woman, but an angel; no longer a mistress but a lover; no longer reality, but the IDEAL!

Lord Ewald looked upon the inventor with an astonishment not untinged with fear.

— Oh, I will explain to you all my procedures! continued the latter. The result is so marvelous by itself that I have no fear of spoiling its deep splendors by submitting them to scientific analysis. You will never be disillusioned. Indeed, just to reassure you on the perfect lucidity of my mind, I'll put you in possession of my secret this very night. But, first of all, to work! The explanations will emerge, as the work progresses, of their own accord. But first, if I recall correctly, Miss Alicia Clary is now in New York, at the opera, is that right?

— Yes.

— What's the number of her box?

— Number seven.



— You didn't explain to her where you were going or why you were leaving her alone?

— She wouldn't have been interested, so I said nothing.

— Has she ever heard my name?

— Perhaps . . . but she forgot it.

— Excellent! said Edison, meditatively; this was very important.

Going to the phonograph, he lifted the needle, examined the track till he found the passage he wanted, replaced the needle, set the machine in front of the telephone, and flicked a switch.

— Martin, are you there? the phonograph said to the telephone.

There was no answer.

— So that's it! The rascal is taking a nap; I bet he's snoring! Edison grumbled, with a smile.

He set to his ear the receiver of a supersensitive microphone.

— Exactly, he said, that's it. When he's had his grog, after dessert, he feels he deserves a siesta — and to keep from being interrupted, the rogue takes the receiver off the hook.

— How far away is this person you're calling? asked Lord Ewald.

— Oh, just in New York, at my Broadway office, Edison replied absentmindedly.

— What! you can hear a man snoring twenty-five leagues away?

— I could hear him from the North Pole! said Edison, especially the way he's snoring now. Do you think any character in your fairy tales could venture to say as much without provoking the children to cry out, in disgust at the absurdity of the story, "Oh, no! not that! That's impossible!" But I can do it now, and tomorrow nobody will be surprised at it. Fortunately, I've foreseen the present incident; I have a shocking little arrangement over there . . . But, no, that's too much; I won't punish him with a spark. — Wait, there's an Aerophone by my bedside, connected with this telephone over here. That'll make a noise to rouse him, and the whole neighborhood as well.

So saying, he applied another apparatus to the phonograph.

— I just hope the horses in the street outside aren't making too much racket, he murmured.

The phonograph repeated its question.

Three seconds later, the deep voice of a man just roused abruptly from sleep seemed to come out of the hat Lord Ewald was holding in his hand, which happened to be touching a speaker hanging near the young man.

— Huh? What? Where's the fire? cried the voice, in frightened tones.

— There, now, said Edison, with a chuckle, our man seems to be up.



He picked up the speaker of the first telephone, into which he himself now spoke.

— No, Martin, that's not it, my friend. The temperature on the automatic fire alarm is just sixty-seven degrees; you needn't worry on that score. I just want you to deliver, immediately and by hand, the message that I'll be sending you in a minute.

— I'm standing by for it, Mr. Edison, said the voice, more calmly now.

Already the electrician was tapping out, in quick bursts of code, a message on the Morse transmitter that stood on a pedestal by his side.

— Do you read me? he asked by way of the telephone.

— Right! I'll carry it myself, came the reply.

And, thanks to a gesture either accidental or joking, by the engineer who had his hand on the central control panel of the laboratory, this speech seemed to come from all the corners of the room at once, from a dozen different speakers. You would have thought twelve distinct individuals were reciting exactly the same words in perfect unison within the room. Lord Ewald looked around, in search of them.

— Give me the answer right away! Edison added, in the tone of voice one uses to catch a man who's running away.

Then, turning toward the young lord:

— Everything's in order, he said.

He stopped, looked at him fixedly, then addressed him coldly, and in a manner rendered particularly emphatic by his sudden change of tone.

— My lord, said he, I should warn you that we are now going to depart together from the domains of everyday life — domains inadequately understood, no doubt, but too much frequented, as you'll no doubt agree. Indeed, we are going to leave the realm of Life properly so called, and penetrate another world of phenomena which will surprise and even astound you. I will give you a key to understanding their linkage. But to explain to you exactly the operation of the various parts — that, I must begin by saying, is quite beyond me, as it is beyond humankind in general — at least for now, and I'm afraid forever.

We are going to observe, nothing more. The Being whose sight you are about to experience is of an indefinable mental condition. Its appearance, even when one is accustomed to it, always causes a certain shock. For us it presents no physical danger; still, I'm bound to warn you, that to see it for the first time without danger of mental collapse, you had best summon to your aid all your coolness... and even a bit of your courage.

After a pause Lord Ewald nodded assent.

— Good, he said. I will try to command all my emotions.



## CHAPTER II

## Security Measures

*I'm not at home to anyone! Do you hear?*

*Not to ANYONE!*

— The Human Comedy

Edison stepped to the great window and closed it, pulled the inner shutters to, and fastened them. The heavy fringes of the curtains closed. Passing to the door of the laboratory, he bolted it shut. That done, he threw a switch that kindled a signal light of bright red flame installed above the pavilion, which indicated to anyone in the neighborhood that a dangerous experiment was under way.

The flick of a switch on the central control panel rendered instantly deaf and dumb all the microtelephone communication channels, except for that from New York.

— Now we're separated a bit from the world of the living! said Edison, sitting down beside his telegraph. Even as he manipulated various wires with his left hand, he was mysteriously scribbling with his right hand long strings of dots and dashes, moving his lips inaudibly.

— Don't you have on you a photograph of Miss Clary? he asked as he wrote.

— It's true. I had forgotten it, said Lord Ewald, drawing a card case from his pocket. Here she is, in her native purity of marble! Look at it, and see if in my words I've exaggerated beyond the reality.

Edison took the photo and glanced at it.

— Prodigious! he cried. It's nothing less than the famous VENUS of the unknown sculptor! It's more than prodigious, it's absolutely stunning! I concede the point.

Turning aside, he touched the switch of a nearby battery.

The spark appeared, as requested, between the double points of a platinum fork; it hesitated there for a couple of seconds, giving its shrill cry, as if trying to decide which way to flee.

A blue wire, seeming to be already saddled for Infinity, approached it. The other end of this wire was lost in the earth. No sooner had the hesitant spark recognized its metallic genie than it leaped aboard and disappeared.

An instant later, a heavy roar was heard under the feet of the two men. It rolled toward them as if from the depths of the earth, as if from the bottom of an abyss; it was a heavy, grinding noise. One would have



thought a coffin was being snatched from the darkness by genies, torn from the earth and raised to the surface.

Edison, still holding the photograph in his hand, kept his eyes riveted to a spot on the wall opposite him at the other end of the laboratory. He seemed anxious and attentive.

The noise ceased.

The electrician placed his hand on an object that Lord Ewald could not make out very well.

— Hadaly! he called aloud.

### CHAPTER III

## Apparition

*Who lurks behind this veil?*

— The shrouded image at Saïs

At this mysterious name, a section of the wall at the south end of the laboratory turned silently on its secret hinges, revealing a small alcove previously hidden behind the masonry.

The full blaze of the electric lighting suddenly focused on the interior of this spot.

Hanging against the concave semicircle of the wall, curtains of black moiré dropped elegantly from an arch of jade to trail on the white marble of the floor; their deep folds were decorated here and there with butterflies embroidered in gold.

Standing on this dais, a sort of BEING appeared, its form suggestive of nothing so much as the *unknown*.

The vision seemed to have features compounded of shadow; a string of pearls across her forehead supported a dark veil that obscured the entire lower part of her head.

A coat of armor, shaped as for a woman out of silver plates, glowed with a soft radiance. Closely molded to the figure, with a thousand perfect nuances, it suggested elegant and virginal forms.

The trailing ends of the veil twined around the neck over the metal gorget, then, tossed back over the shoulders, were knotted behind her back; thence they fell to the waist of the apparition like a flowing head of long hair, finally dropping to the ground, where they were lost in shadow.

A scarf of black batiste was knotted about her waist like a loincloth, and trailed across her legs a line of black fringe into which brilliants had been sewn.



Within the folds of this veil was visible the glittering blade of a drawn dagger. The vision rested her right hand on the handle of this poniard, while her left hand, hanging by her side, held a golden flower. On all the fingers of her hands glittered rings set with various stones; they seemed to be fastened to her fine gloves.

After an instant of immobility, this mysterious being descended the single step of her platform and advanced toward the two spectators in all her disquieting beauty. Though her step seemed light, her footfalls resounded through the room; under the strong lights, her armor glittered.

Three steps away from Edison and Lord Ewald, the apparition stopped. Then, in a voice deliciously grave:

— Well, my dear Edison, here I am! she said.

Lord Ewald, not knowing what to think, looked at her in silence.

— The time has come for you to live, if you wish, Miss Hadaly, Edison replied.

— Oh, I don't insist on living! the voice murmured gently from beneath its heavy veil.

— This young man has accepted in your behalf! said the engineer, tossing into an electrical apparatus the picture of Miss Alicia.

— As he desires it, so let it be! said Hadaly, after a pause, and with a slight bow toward Lord Ewald.

Edison also looked toward the young man; then, with a touch of his finger, he caused a powerful magnesium light at the other end of the laboratory to burst into flame. Directed by a precise reflector, an intense beam of light focused on a lens directly before the photograph of Miss Alicia Clary. Above it, another complex of lenses and mirrors multiplied the refraction of its penetrating rays.

A square of colored glass appeared almost instantly in the center of the objective; then, sliding out of its groove, it entered a sort of mechanical cell, perforated with two circular holes.

The incandescent ray passed through the imprinted glass by the first of these holes, emerged in full color from the second, which was capped by the inverted cone of a projector — and within a gigantic frame, on a screen of white silk high on the wall, appeared life size the luminous and transparent image of a young woman, a flesh-and-blood statue of the *Venus Victorious*, if such a thing ever lived and breathed in this land of illusions.

— Really, murmured Lord Ewald, I'm in a dream, I think!

— This, said Edison, turning toward Hadaly, this is the form in which you will be incarnated.



She took a step toward the radiant image, which she seemed to contemplate a moment from under her veil.

— Oh! . . . So lovely! . . . And you will force me to live! she said softly, as if to herself.

Then, lowering her head, and with a deep sigh:

— So be it! she said.

The magnesium flared out; the vision on the wall disappeared.

Edison held out his hand at the level of Hadaly's brow.

She trembled a bit, then held out wordlessly the symbolic golden flower to Lord Ewald. He accepted it, not without a vague shudder. She turned and, like a sleepwalker, returned to the strange place from which she had come.

Having reached the threshold, she turned and, raising her two hands to the dark veil over her face, she blew a distant kiss to those who had evoked her. The gesture was bathed in the fresh and warm grace of an adolescent.

She stepped back, pushed aside a section of the dark drapes, and disappeared.

The wall closed behind her.

The same dark noise was heard, but this time fading away and vanishing in the depths of the earth. It dwindled to nothing.

The two men were once more alone under the bright lamps.

— Who is this strange creature? asked Lord Ewald, fastening in his lapel the emblematic flower of Miss Hadaly.

— *It is not a living being*, Edison replied quietly, his eyes on the eyes of Lord Ewald.

#### CHAPTER IV

### Preliminaries to a Miracle

*Without phosphorus, no thought.*

— Moleschott

At this revelation, Lord Ewald, staring into the eyes of the terrifying scientist, seemed to be wondering if he could believe his ears.

— I tell you, Edison resumed, that this metal which walks, speaks, answers, and obeys is not the covering of any *person* in the ordinary sense of the word.

And as Lord Ewald continued to look at him in silence:

— No, *nobody*, he went on. So far Miss Hadaly is nothing at all *from*



*the outside* but a magnetoelectric entity. She is a Being in Limbo, a mere potentiality. In a little while, if you wish, I will open before you all the secrets of her magical nature. But here (he went on, gesturing to Lord Ewald to follow him), here is something that may be able to give you more insight into the words you have just heard.

And, guiding the young man through the labyrinth of apparatus, he led him toward the ebony table on which the moonlight had shone briefly before Lord Ewald's visit.

— Would you care to tell me what sort of impression this spectacle makes on you? he asked, while pointing to the pale and bloody feminine arm resting on the violet silk cushion.

Amazed again, Lord Ewald stared at the unexpected human relic that now was lighted by an eerie electric brilliance.

— What is it? he asked.

— Look at it carefully.

The young man picked up the hand.

— How can that be? What's the meaning of it? This hand... but it's still warm!

— Don't you find anything more *extraordinary* than that about this arm?

After examining it another moment, Lord Ewald suddenly exclaimed under his breath.

— Oh! This, I swear, is a miracle as surprising as *the other*, enough to baffle the most skeptical. Without the wound, I would never have been aware of the masterpiece!

The Englishman seemed fascinated; he picked up the hand and compared it with his own.

— The weight! The modeling! The exact coloration! he went on, almost dumbfounded. Isn't it real flesh that I touch at this moment? My own shivered at it, upon my word!

— Oh, it's better than real! Edison said simply. Flesh fades and grows old. This is a combination of various exquisite substances, elaborated by chemistry; it's a direct rebuke to the complacency of "Nature." (And, by the way, I'd like to be introduced to that great lady Nature some day, because everybody talks about her and nobody has ever seen her.) This *copy*, let's say, of Nature — if I may use this empirical word — will bury the original without itself ceasing to appear alive and young. Before growing old, it will perish in a thunderclap. It is *artificial flesh*, and I can explain to you how it's produced; or else you can read Berthelot.

— How's that? You were saying...?



— I say: it is artificial flesh, the electrician repeated. And I think I'm the only one who can make it of this quality!

Lord Ewald, incapable of expressing the turmoil these words had created in his mind, inspected the unreal arm once again.

— But, he finally asked, this pearly fluid, this warm fleshy glow, this intense *life*... how were you able to create the miracle of this disturbing illusion?

— Oh, that aspect of the question is nothing! Edison replied with a smile. It was done quite simply with the aid of the Sun.

— The Sun! murmured Lord Ewald.

— Exactly. The Sun allowed us to catch, in part, the secret of its vibrations, said Edison. Once the delicate tones of dermal whiteness are caught through a series of lenses, I had no trouble in reproducing them. This supple bit of solidified albumen, the elasticity of which is due simply to hydraulic pressure, I was able to reproduce by means of an extremely subtle photochromic operation. I had an admirable model to copy. As for the rest, the ivory humerus contains a magnetic marrow, in constant contact with a network of induction wires woven through the flesh after the fashion of nerves and veins, a network that controls the steady release of caloric heat, which just gave you the impression of warmth and malleability. If you want to know where the elements of this network are placed, how they nourish themselves (so to speak), and how the static fluid transforms its energy into something like animal heat, I can explain the anatomy to you: this is simply an obvious matter of workmanship. This is the arm of an Android of my making, animated for the first time by this vital, surprising agent that we call Electricity, which gives it, as you see, all the soft and melting qualities, all the *illusion* of Life!

— An Android?

— An Imitation Human Being, if you prefer. The mistake to be avoided, now, is that the *facsimile* may *physically* surpass the original. Do you recall, my lord, those artisans of former days who tried to create artificial human beings? Ha, ha, ha, ha!

Edison laughed like one of the Cabiri in the forges of Eleusis.

— Poor fellows, for lack of the proper technical skills, they produced nothing but ridiculous monsters. Albertus Magnus, Vaucanson, Maelzel, Horner, and all that crowd were barely competent makers of scarecrows. Their automata deserve to be exhibited in the most hideous of wax museums; they are disgusting objects from which proceeds a rank smell of wood, rancid oil, and gutta-percha. Degraded works of that sort give man no sense of power; instead, they only force him to bow his head



before the great god, Chaos. Just call to mind that succession of jerky, extravagant movements, reminiscent of Nuremberg dolls! The absurdity of their shapes and colors! Their animation, as of wigmakers' dummies! That noise of the key in the mechanism! The sensation of vacancy! In a word, everything in these abominable masquerades produces in us a sense of horror and shame. Contempt and disgust join together in a grotesque ceremony. They look like the idols of the Australian archipelago, fetishes from the jungles of equatorial Africa; these mannequins are nothing but an outrageous caricature of our species. Yes, such were the first sketches of Androids.

As he spoke, Edison's face sharpened and hardened. His eyes seemed to be probing imaginary shadows; his voice became curt, cold, didactic.

— But today, he resumed, that period is past. Science has multiplied her discoveries; metaphysical conceptions have been refined. The techniques of reproduction, of *identification* have been rendered more precise and perfect, so that the resources available to man for new ventures of this sort are now different — oh, completely different — than they used to be. Henceforth, we shall be able to realize — that is, to MAKE REAL — potent phantoms, mysterious presences *of a mixed nature*, such as pioneers in the field could never have conceived, and at the thought of which they would have smiled sadly and cried, "Impossible!" — Think now, didn't you, just now, find it difficult to smile at the appearance of Hadaly? And yet, I assure you, she is nothing but an uncut diamond so far. She is the *skeleton of a shade* waiting for the SHADE to exist! The sensation you just had from touching one of the arms of a female Android didn't seem to you remotely like what you would have had from touching the arm of an automaton — am I right? Try something else: would you like to shake this hand? Who knows! Perhaps it will respond.

Lord Ewald lifted the fingers and shook them gently.

Amazement! The hand replied to this pressure with a courtesy so sensitive and remote that the young man could only think it must be a part of some invisible body. Deeply distressed, he laid down the shadowy object.

— My word! he murmured.

— Well, Edison went on coolly, all this is still nothing! Nothing, I tell you, nothing at all! (*But the things that are called nothing! Ah, I could tell you!*) Nothing in comparison with the task that lies ahead. Ah, the task that lies ahead! If you could conceive! If you...

Abruptly he fell silent as if struck by a sudden idea, one so terrible that it cut short his speech.

— Really, cried Lord Ewald, looking once more around him, it seems



to me that I've come into the world of Flamel, Paracelsus, or Raymond Lull, the magicians and alchemists of the Middle Ages. But where is all this leading, my dear Edison?

But the great inventor, suddenly become very thoughtful, sat down, and considered his young friend with a new and worried expression.

After a short silence:

— My lord, he said, it's just struck me that for a man endowed with your imagination, the experiment could well lead to tragic consequences. Consider this: when you stand at the entry to a steel factory, you can make out through the smoke some men, some metal, the fires. The furnaces roar, the hammers crash; and the metalworkers who forge ingots, weapons, tools, and so on are completely ignorant of the *real* uses to which their products will be put. The workers can only refer to their products by conventional names. Well, that's where we all stand, all of us! Nobody can see the real character of what he creates because every knife blade may become a dagger, and *the use to which an object is put changes both its name and its nature*. Only our ignorance shields us from terrible responsibilities.

Uncertainty is a quality to be cherished, therefore — if not for it, who would dare to undertake anything?

The worker who molds a bullet says to himself, secretly and silently: "This is work done at random — *and perhaps it will simply be lead thrown away*." And so he completes his task, the end of which is hidden from him. But if he saw before his eyes the gaping, gory, mortal wound that this bullet, among others, is bound and indeed predestined to create (and which, as a consequence, is virtually a part of his work), the mold would fall from his hands, if he were an honest man; and perhaps he would deny his children their daily bread, if the price of that bread were the accomplishment of this murder — for he would shrink, by instinct, from making himself an accomplice of that future homicide.

— Well? interrupted Lord Ewald. What are you getting at, Edison?

— Just this. I am the man who holds the liquid lead over the fire; and just a moment ago, as I was thinking of your temperament and your mind forever ravaged by cynicism, it seemed to me that I saw the wound before my eyes. *The thing I want to tell you* may restore your health or prove *worse than fatal*, remember that. So I am the one who hesitates now. We both have parts to play in the experiment. And in reality I think it is much more dangerous, for you at least, than it appeared at first glance. The danger, which is of the most horrible sort you can conceive, is a danger for you alone. No doubt you're already in danger, since yours is one of those hearts that a fatal passion almost always leads to a



miserable end; and no doubt, too, I run a risk in trying to save you. But if the outcome of the experiment is not that for which I hope, I believe, I really do believe, *that we would be better off stopping right here!*

— Since you assume such a particularly solemn tone, Lord Ewald replied with an effort, I might as well tell you, my dear Edison, that I expected to put an end to my miserable existence this very night.

Edison shuddered.

— So you needn't hesitate any further, the young man concluded icily.

— The die is cast! murmured the engineer: he is the one! Who would ever have supposed it?

— One last time, will you be good enough to answer me: What are you getting at?

In the instant of silence that followed, Lord Ewald felt pass across his forehead a chilly gust from the Infinite.

— Ah, then! Edison cried in a voice of thunder, raising his glittering eyes, if that's the challenge I am sent by the Unknown, so be it! Listen now. I offer to accomplish for you, my lord, what no man has ever dared to attempt for another. I owe you a life, my own; the least I can do is to give you yours.

You say your being, your vital joy, have been taken from you by a human presence? By the light of a smile, the gaiety of an expression, the softness of a voice? A living woman leads you, by her attractiveness, to your death?

All right! Since this woman is precious to you — I AM GOING TO STEAL HER OWN EXISTENCE AWAY FROM HER!

I'm going to show you, with mathematical certainty and on this very spot (the demonstration may freeze your soul, but you cannot refute it), I'm going to show, I say, how, making use of modern Science, I can capture the grace of her gesture, the fullness of her body, the fragrance of her flesh, the resonance of her voice, the turn of her waist, the light of her eyes, the quality of her movements and gestures, the individuality of her glance, all her traits and characteristics, her *appearance* down to the shadow she casts on the ground — the reflection of her identity, in a word. I shall be the murderer of her foolishness, the assassin of her triumphant animal nature. In the first place, I shall reincarnate her entire external appearance, which to you is so deliciously mortal, in an Apparition whose HUMAN likeness and charm alone will surpass your wildest hopes, your most intimate dreams! And then, *in place of this soul which repels you in the living woman, I shall infuse another sort of soul, less aware of itself perhaps (but about this sort of thing, who can tell? and what does it matter?), a soul capable of impressions a*



thousand times lovelier, loftier, nobler — that is, they will be robed in that character of eternity without which our mortal life can be no more than a shabby comedy. I will reproduce this woman exactly, I will duplicate her, with the sublime assistance of Light! And then, projecting her through her RADIANT MATTER, I will fill with the visions of your melancholy the imaginary soul of this new creature, a creature capable of amazing the angels. I will cast Illusion to the ground and enclose it in a prison! In this vision, I will compel the Ideal itself to become apparent, for the first time, *to your senses*, PALPABLE, AUDIBLE, AND FULLY MATERIAL. I will recapture, even as it fleets away, the first moment of this enchanted mirage, which you pursue now so vainly through your memories. And then, fixing it, almost eternally, do you understand, in the single true aspect under which you first perceived it, *I will duplicate the living woman in a second copy, transfigured according to your deepest desires!* I shall endow this Shade with all the songs of that Antonia described by the tale-teller Hoffmann, with all the passionate mysticism of Edgar Poe's Ligeia, with all the burning seductions of that Venus conceived by the mighty musician Wagner! And finally, to restore you to life, I promise — and I can prove to you in advance, that I absolutely have this power — I promise to raise from the clay of Human Science as it now exists, a Being *made in our image*, and who, accordingly, will be to us WHAT WE ARE TO GOD.

And the engineer, raising his hand, made solemn oath.

## CHAPTER V

### Amazement

*I was MUMMIFIED with astonishment.*

— Théophile Gautier

At these words Lord Ewald stared blankly at Edison; you would have thought he was *refusing to understand* what had been said to him. After a minute of stupefaction:

— But . . . such a creature could never be anything but a doll, without feeling or intelligence! he cried, for lack of anything else to say.

— My lord, said Edison solemnly, you may take this on my word of honor: you will have to be careful, when you compare the two and listen to them both, *that it isn't the living woman who seems to you the doll.*

Not yet having recovered his self-possession, the young man smiled bitterly, with a kind of constrained politeness.



— Let's not argue that point, he said. The conception is stunning; the finished project will always smack of machinery. Come now, don't ask me to think that you can create a woman! And as I listen to you, I ask myself if your genius —

— I swear to you, in the first place, *you will not be able to distinguish one from the other*, the engineer interrupted quietly. And for the second time, I tell you, I am in a position to prove it in advance.

— IMPOSSIBLE, Edison.

— For the third time, I promise to furnish you *immediately*, however little you want it, proof positive, *point by point* and *in advance*, not that the thing is possible, but that it is mathematically *certain*.

— You can reproduce the IDENTITY of a woman? You, a man born of woman?

— She will be a thousand times more identical to herself... than she is in her own person! Yes, I assure you! Since not a day passes without changing some outlines of the human body, and the science of physiology demonstrates to us that the body changes *completely* all of its atoms, every seven years approximately. Does anyone's body really exist at any given point? Does one ever resemble oneself? When this woman, and you, and I, were just an hour and twenty minutes old, did we resemble what we are tonight? The very idea of resembling oneself! What is this, a prejudice out of the ice age or the time of the cavemen?

— You will reproduce her with her beauty, even that? Her flesh? Her voice? Her posture? Her very look?

— With Electromagnetic Power and Radiant Matter, I will deceive the heart of a mother, and much more easily the passion of a lover. Just listen! I will duplicate her so exactly that if in a dozen years or so she should happen to see her unchanged ideal double, she will be unable to look at it without tears of *envy* — and of terror!

After a moment's thought, Lord Ewald murmured under his breath:

— But to undertake the making of such a creature would be, I should think, like tempting... *God*.

— That's why I haven't told you to accept! Edison replied, speaking in a low voice and very simply.

— Will you infuse into it an intelligence?

— A particular intelligence? No. INTELLIGENCE, yes.

At this titanic phrase, Lord Ewald stood as if petrified before the inventor. Their gazes crossed in silence.

A game had been proposed. The stakes were, literally, nothing less than a soul.



## CHAPTER VI

## Excelsior!

*Under my care, patients may lose their lives; — but never hope!*

— Doctor Ryllh

— I repeat, my dear genius, the young man replied, you undoubtedly mean well; but what you say is nothing but a dream, as terrifying as it is impractical. Still, I'm touched by the warmth of your sympathy, and I thank you for it.

— My lord . . . you know perfectly well that the idea is practical, since you hesitate before it.

Lord Ewald wiped his brow.

— Miss Alicia Clary would never agree to take part in this experiment, and besides, I must admit, I should be very reluctant to involve her in it.

— This is simply part of the problem, and it concerns me alone. Besides, *the work would be incomplete, that is to say ABSURD*, if it were not accomplished completely without the knowledge of Miss Alicia, of whom you're so careful.

— But what about me? cried Lord Ewald. I count for something too in my own love affair, I suppose!

— You'll never understand how much you count, I assure you, said Edison.

— Well, then, what devious subtleties will you use to convince me, me myself, of the *reality* of this new Eve, even supposing you succeed in making her?

— Oh, that's a question of immediate sense impressions, into which reason enters only as a belated and unimportant assistant. Does one ever reason about an enchantment one is experiencing? Besides, the logic to which I will expose you will simply be the exact impression of what you are now trying to hide from yourself. I am human. *Homo sum*. The Work will answer your questions far better with its mere presence.

— I can raise objections, can't I — indeed, I insist on it — during the course of the explanations?

— If A SINGLE ONE of your objections persists, we will stop short and go no further.

Lord Ewald turned thoughtful again.

— Alas, my eyes are fearfully clear-sighted; I should warn you of that.

— Your eyes! Tell me, don't you suppose you see quite distinctly this



drop of water? Well, if I place it between these two crystal slides under the objective of this solar microscope and then project its exact image onto that white silk screen where your bewitching Alicia appeared just a minute ago, won't your eyes repudiate their original impressions in the face of the more intimate spectacle that the drop of water reveals of its own accord? And if we think of all the hidden realities that this drop of water still conceals, we will understand that even the power of our instrument, which is nothing but a kind of crutch to the eye, is utterly insignificant. The difference between what it shows us and what we can see without its help, by comparison with all the things it *might* show us, is, practically speaking, imperceptible. Never forget that the only things we see in objects are those which our eyes *suggest* to us. We only form our ideas of them from the few glimpses of their real being that they let us catch; we possess them only to the extent that we are able to experience them, each one of us according to his own nature. And Man, like a solemn squirrel, scurries forever around the spinning wheel of his own EGO without being able to escape from the illusion in which he is caged by his ridiculous senses. Thus Hadaly, when she deceives your sight, will do nothing else in reality than what Miss Alicia does.

— Seriously speaking, Mr. Magician, Lord Ewald replied, do you actually think I'm capable of "falling in love" with Miss Hadaly?

— That, in fact, is exactly what I would have to fear if you were a man of the common sort, Edison declared. But your confession has relieved my mind on that score. Didn't you swear before God, just a moment ago, that every idea of possessing your beautiful mistress was forever ruined within you? I tell you, then, you will love Hadaly as she deserves to be loved, for herself alone; which is a much finer thing than simply being in love with her.

— I'll *love* her?

— Why not? Won't she be incarnate forever in the only form under which you can conceive of love? And, matter for matter (since we've just reminded ourselves that flesh, being never the same, exists almost exclusively in the imagination), flesh for flesh, that created by Science is more . . . serious . . . than the other.

— One can only love an animate being! said Lord Ewald.

— Well, then? asked Edison.

— The soul is the unknown; are you going to animate your Hadaly?

— One animates a bullet, say, by giving it a speed of X. Well, X is the unknown, too.

— Will she know who she is? Or, rather, what she is, I should say?



— Do we know so well ourselves who we are and what we are? Will you demand more of the copy than God has seen fit to grant to the original?

— I meant to ask if your creature will be capable of self-awareness?

— No doubt about it! said Edison, as if surprised by the very question.

— What! Do you mean to say . . . ? cried Lord Ewald in amazement.

— I say: No doubt! Since this depends on you. And in fact it's on you alone that I depend for this part of the miracle to be accomplished.

— On me?

— On whom else? Is there anyone else I could depend on to be as interested in the problem as you are?

— Well, then, said Lord Ewald gloomily, will you kindly tell me, my dear Edison, where I ought to go in order to catch a spark of that sacred fire with which the World Spirit infuses us? My name is not Prometheus, merely Lord Celian Ewald, and I'm nothing but a mortal man.

— Bah! cried Edison. Every man bears the name of Prometheus without knowing it — and none escapes the beak of the vulture. My lord, I tell you the simple truth: a single one of those still-divine sparks, drawn from your own soul, with which you have tried so often (but always vainly) to inspire the blank mind of your present mistress, will serve to give life to the shadow.

— Prove this to me, cried Lord Ewald, and then, perhaps . . .

— So be it; and right away.

— You have declared, Edison continued, that the creature whom you love, and who for you is the sole REALITY, is by no means the one who *appears* in this transient human figure, but a creature of your desire.

That is what does not exist in her; much more, *you know it doesn't exist there*. For you're not a dupe — neither of the woman nor of yourself.

You deliberately close your eyes, those of your understanding, you deliberately stifle the voice of your conscience, in order to be able to find in this mistress of yours only the phantom you desire. For you at least, her *true* personality is nothing but the Illusion planted in your entire being by the power of her beauty. This Illusion is the one thing that you struggle against all odds to REVIVE in the presence of your beloved, in spite of the frightful, deadly, withering nullity of the real Alicia.

What you love is this *shadow* alone; it's for the shadow that you want to die. That and that alone is what you recognize as unconditionally REAL. In short, it's this objectified projection of your own soul that you call on, you perceive, that you CREATE in your living woman, and *which is nothing but your own soul reduplicated in her*. Yes, that is your love; and, as you see, it is nothing but a continual and ever-fruitless attempt at redemption.



There was another moment of profound silence between the two men.

— Well, then, Edison concluded, since it's established that you are living now and have lived in the past with nothing but a Shade, onto which you project from your own fervid soul a fictive existence, I offer you a chance to project the same feelings on a shadow of your spirit realized from without — that's the only difference. Illusion for illusion, the Being of this mixed presence called Hadaly depends on the free will of him who will DARE to conceive it. SUGGEST IT TO HER FROM THE DEPTHS OF YOUR SELF! Affirm her being with a little of your vital faith, as you affirm the being (no more than relative at best) of all the illusions that surround you. Blow the breath of life on those ideal features! You will see then how the Alicia of your desires will become tangible, concentrated, animated in this Shade. Give it a try, then, if some last hope still stirs within you. And then you will judge in your own intimate conscience whether this auxiliary Creature-Phantom that leads you back to the love of life doesn't really merit the name of HUMAN more than that living specter whose sorry so-called reality was never able to inspire you with anything but the desire for death.

Lord Ewald reflected a moment in silence.

— The deduction is in fact both specious and profound, he murmured with a faint smile. But I suspect I should find myself rather too *alone* in the company of your unaware Eve.

— Less alone than with her original; that's already been shown. Besides, my lord, that would be your fault, not hers. What the devil! One has to feel oneself a deity, in fact, when one ventures to make such wishes as we're talking of here.

Edison paused.

— Besides, he added in an odd tone of voice, I don't think you're taking into account the *novelty* of the impressions you'll receive when for the first time you stroll across the lawn in full sunshine, with the Android-Alicia at your side, turning her parasol to shade her face from the sun with all the *natural* grace of the original. You smile? You think that, especially when they've been warned in advance, your senses will quickly discover the differences between my work and that of "Nature"? Well, listen here now. Miss Alicia perhaps has some dog, a greyhound or a Newfoundland that knows her? Do you have a special favorite among your hunting hounds?

— I have my dog Dark, a black greyhound, and very devoted to us, whom we've taken on our trip.

— Good. This animal, said Edison, is endowed with a sense of smell so powerful that living beings with their different odors actually paint



their portraits on the central nervous system through the seven or eight different receptors making up the dog's nasal apparatus.

— I will bet you that this dog — one who would pick out his mistress from among a thousand others in the dark — if we take him away from your presences for a week or so, and then bring him back into the presence of Hadaly as she will be transfigured, will come running at the voice of the Illusion, will recognize her without hesitation, simply from the fragrance of her dress. Better still, put in the presence simultaneously of the Shadow and the Reality, I tell you it is the Reality that he will bark at, in his confusion, and the Shadow — only the Shadow — whom he will obey!

— Aren't you promising a good deal, here? murmured Lord Ewald, disconcerted.

— I promise nothing but what I can fulfill. The experiment is already completely successful; it's an established fact within the discipline of physiology. And besides, if I can completely deceive the senses (they are far sharper than our own) of a simple animal, why should I hesitate before the test of imposing on human senses?

Lord Ewald could hardly restrain a smile at the bizarre ingenuity of the electrician.

— And then, Edison concluded, even though Hadaly is a very mysterious creature, you must look at her without any exaggeration. Consider it this way: *her operation will be a little more dependent on electricity than that of her model*; but that's all.

— How do you mean, than her model? Lord Ewald demanded.

— Of course! said Edison. Haven't you ever admired, on a stormy day, a beautiful young brunette combing her hair before a great mirror, in a slightly darkened room, or one where the curtains have been drawn? The sparks crackle in her hair and glitter like magic fires on the teeth of her tortoiseshell comb; they are like thousands of diamonds streaming off a black wave on the open ocean at night. Hadaly will provide you with such a spectacle if Miss Alicia has not already done so. Brunettes are full of electricity.

After an instant:

— Well, Edison asked, are you willing to attempt this INCARNATION, my lord? Hadaly, through this flower of grief which is of virgin gold, pure without the slightest alloy, offers you a chance to save from the catastrophe of your love a little melancholy.

Lord Ewald and his interlocutor stared at one another, silent and solemn.

— I must say, the young man murmured under his breath, speaking as if only to himself, this is the most terrible dilemma ever placed before



a desperate man. And in spite of myself, I still have all the trouble in the world to take it seriously.

— That will come, said Edison; leave it up to Hadaly.

— Another man, if only out of curiosity, would waste no time in accepting the opportunity you offer me.

— That's why I wouldn't make the offer to just anyone, Edison replied with a smile. If I should bequeath the formula to humanity, I pity the reprobates who try to misuse the help she can bring; that's all.

— See here now, said Lord Ewald, the word in these surroundings may well sound like a sacrilege: but will there always be time to . . . suspend . . . the operation?

— Oh, even after the whole thing is done, since you will always be able to destroy her — drown her if you like — *without upsetting the Deluge in the least*.

— No doubt, said Lord Ewald, sunk deep in his own thoughts. But it seems to me that *then* it won't be the same thing.

— Then I advise you to have nothing to do with it. You're suffering; I talk to you of a remedy. Only the remedy is just as effective as it is dangerous. I tell you a thousand times over, you are always free to refuse.

Lord Ewald seemed perplexed, and all the more so because he would have found it impossible to say precisely why.

— Oh, as for the danger! . . . he said.

— If it was nothing but physical danger, I would tell you directly: Accept!

— You think, then, it's my reason that would be threatened?

A moment of silence.

— My lord Ewald, Edison resumed, you are beyond doubt the most noble nature that I have encountered on this earth. A malignant star has cast its ray on you, and I led you into the world of Love; there your dream has fallen to earth, its wings shattered, at the breath of a deceptive woman whose constant dissonance rouses in you at every moment that corrosive grief which is eating you away, and will necessarily lead you to your grave. Yes, you are one of those least splendid melancholics who scorn to survive this sort of test, despite the common example all around them of people who struggle against illness, misery, and love. The grief of this first disappointment was such, in you, that now you think yourself quits with your fellow men — despising them because they submit to live under the whips and scorns of such a destiny. Spleen has cast her winding sheet over your thoughts, and now that clammy figure which counsels suicide has spoken in your ear the word that will



persuade you. You are deathly ill. For you it's simply a question of hours, you just told me so clearly yourself; the outcome of the crisis is not even in doubt any longer. If you walk out of this room, it's to your death; death shows through your entire presence, oppressive, imminent.

Lord Ewald, without replying, tapped off the ash of his cigar with the tip of his little finger.

— Here I offer you your life again — but at what price, perhaps! Who can calculate the price at this time? The Ideal has lied to you? "Truth" has destroyed your every desire? A woman has frozen your senses?

Well, then, farewell to that so-called Reality, liar that she was from the start!

I offer you, myself, a venture into the ARTIFICIAL and its untasted delights! But... if you are not going to be able to retain control of it!... Come, my lord, between the two of us, we form an eternal symbol: I represent Science and the omnipotence of its delusions; you are Humanity with its paradise lost.

— Then make the choice for me, said Lord Ewald quietly.

Edison shuddered.

— That is impossible, my lord, he replied.

— In a word... *putting yourself in my place*... would you risk your life in this absurd, unheard-of, yet somehow challenging adventure?

Before this challenge, Edison paused, looking on the young man with his customary fixity, now deepened by a secret mental reservation that he did not want to express.

— I should have, he said at last, rather different reasons than most men in making my personal option. I don't believe that anybody else should base himself on my example.

— What would you decide?

— If I were placed in your dilemma, I should make the choice that seemed to me the least dangerous... *for me personally*.

— Well, what would that choice be?

— My lord, you don't doubt my attachment to you, the deep and tender affection that I feel for you?... Well, on my inmost conscience, then...

— What would be your choice, Edison?

— Between death and the alternative I have offered you?

— Yes!

Terrible, the great electrician bowed before Lord Ewald:

— I should blow out my brains, he said.



## CHAPTER VII

## Of the Swiftness of Scholars

*Who wants to change old lamps for new?*

— Aladdin, in the *Thousand and One Nights*

After a moment's thought, Lord Ewald glanced at his watch. His forehead had darkened.

— Thank you, he said with a wintry smile. And now, farewell.

In the shadows, a bell sounded.

— I'm afraid I must tell you it's a little late, said Edison. After your first words, *I set things in motion*.

He rapped on the phonograph crouched at his feet like a dog.

— Well, what is it? the phonograph asked, barking into its own telephone.

The deep voice of the invisible messenger rang out in the middle of the laboratory, sounding like the speech of a man out of breath from running:

— Miss Alicia Clary, in Box Number 7 of the Grand Theater, is leaving the hall, and will take the twelve-thirty A.M. express for Menlo Park!

Lord Ewald, hearing the name cried aloud in this manner, and struck by the unexpected news, made a gesture.

The two men stared at one another in silence; between them trembled an unspoken challenge.

— The thing is, said Lord Ewald, I haven't taken any quarters for the night in Menlo Park.

Even as he spoke, Edison was operating the transmitter of his telegraph; the wires trembled.

— Just a minute, he said, and slid a sheet of paper into the receiver, which ten seconds later dropped it on the table.

— You spoke of quarters? It's all taken care of; here is something I hope will suit, he said coolly, reading what had just been printed on the paper. I've just rented for you a perfectly charming villa, with private grounds of its own, about twenty minutes from here. The staff will be expecting you there anytime in the course of the night. You will dine with me here, I hope, along with Miss Alicia Clary? That's settled, then. When the train pulls in, my servant, furnished with this new photograph, which reproduces simply the face of Miss Venus Victorious, will offer her my carriage on your behalf and bring her here. There's no chance of a mistake or a misunderstanding; hardly anybody arrives



here at such a late hour. So there's no reason for you to be disturbed about anything.

Even as he talked, he withdrew the miniature portrait from an automatic camera, penciled a couple of hasty lines on it, and tossed it into a receptacle fixed on the wall.

The receptacle was part of a network of pneumatic tubes; a tiny bell, beside it, acknowledged receipt of the message and conveyed the assurance that it would be carried out.

Turning back to the telegraph, he continued to send out what were, no doubt, other orders.

— That takes care of it, he said abruptly. Then, turning to Lord Ewald:

— My lord, he added, it goes without saying that if this is your desire, we won't say another word regarding the project we were discussing just now.

Lord Ewald raised his head; his blue eyes glittered.

— Really, now, it would be too much to hesitate any longer, he said simply. This time I accept, my dear Edison, once and for all.

Gravely, Edison bowed.

— Very well, he said. *I expect, my lord, that you will do me the honor to live for twenty-one days more; for I too have given my word.*

— *Agreed—but not one day more!* said the young man, with the quiet, icy intonation of an Englishman whose mind is settled, and who will not go back on his pledge.

Edison glanced at the second hand of the electric clock.

— I will hand you the pistol myself at nine o'clock of the day we have agreed on, he said, if I haven't restored in you the will to live. Unless perhaps, in order to destroy yourself, you prefer to make use of our recent prisoner, the power of lightning; there are no mistakes with that.

He turned to the telephone.

— And now, added the engineer, as we are about to undertake a fairly dangerous trip this very instant, will you pardon me while I say good-bye to my children; for one's children are really something.

At this last expression, master of himself though the young lord was, he shuddered.

Edison had already grasped a telephone hidden in the draperies and called two names into the apparatus.

Far out in the night winds at the foot of the park, the ringing of a bell, muffled here by the tapestries, replied to him.

— *Many thousand kisses!* Edison called paternally into the mouthpiece of the instrument and blew several kisses with his words.

Then something strange occurred.



Around the two searchers into the unknown, the two travelers into the shades, there burst from every side (thanks to some twist that Edison had given to a commutator) a joyous rain of charming childish kisses, as of infants crying in their silvery voices:

— Wait, papa! Wait, papa! Again! Again!

Edison pressed to his cheek the receiver of the telephone, which was bringing him these baby kisses.

— Now, my lord, I am ready, he said.

— No; you must stay behind, Edison, said Lord Ewald forlornly. I am useless; it's better that I confront, alone if that is possible . . .

— Let's go, said the engineer, the glitter of confident genius in his eyes.

## CHAPTER VIII

### Time at a Stop

*But the other thought! the thought in  
the BACK OF THE HEAD!*

— Pascal

The pact was sealed.

Taking up two great bearskin coats from a hanger on the wall, the engineer, suddenly grim of expression, offered one to Lord Ewald.

— Our journey will be cold, he said; better wear this.

Lord Ewald accepted silently; then, not without a slight smile:

— Would it be indiscreet to ask where we are going?

— Why, to see Hadaly, of course. To the land of thunder and lightning, where the flashes of electricity measure twelve feet, Edison replied absently as he struggled into his Eskimo costume.

— Let's hurry then, Lord Ewald murmured, in a tone that was almost joyful.

— By the way, you don't have any last communication for me, do you? Edison asked.

— No, none, replied the young lord. I'm eager to talk a bit more, I admit, with that pretty veiled creature whose nothingness was very agreeable to me. As for the trifling observations that come to mind, we'll have time to consider them later.

At these last words Edison lifted his head under the radiant lamps and pulled off his bearskin coat.

— Here now, he cried, have you forgotten, my lord, that my name is



Electricity, and that it's your thinking I must struggle against? *Right now* is the time to talk. Come out with all your trifling worries and objections, or I won't know what I have to oppose! At best, it's no trifling task to pit oneself against an Ideal such as yours. I tell you truly, Jacob himself would think twice before wrestling with such a shadow. Come now, tell the whole story to the doctor who says he's going to cure your sickness.

— Oh, my thoughts so far . . . concern mere *nothings*, said the young man.

— Plague take it! cried the engineer, now you're talking plain nonsense! *Mere* NOTHINGS? But if just one of these nothings is overlooked, the Ideal is lost! Do you recall that Frenchman's joke: "If Cleopatra's nose had been a bit shorter, the whole face of the globe would have altered." *Nothing*? But even in our own time what determines the most serious things in the world? Yesterday a kingdom collapsed because someone was tapped with a fan; today, an empire fell because someone didn't tip his hat. You must allow me to judge the nothings at their proper value. Nothingness! It's a thing so useful that God himself didn't hesitate to draw the world out of it; and the same thing happens every day. Without Nothingness, God declares implicitly, it would have been practically impossible for him to create the Becomingness of things. We are no more than a perpetual state of *being no more*. Nothingness is Negative Matter, essential yet conditional, without which we would not be sitting here and talking tonight. It's precisely in connection with our present project that I have to be careful of the Nothings. Tell me all about these little *nothings* that disturb you; we can take our trip later. — Devil take it, he added, we have barely enough time before your living lady arrives and I pluck her of her peacock feathers. Three hours and a half, if that.

So saying, he dropped the fur coat beside his chair and sat down, leaning on an old Volta battery; then, crossing his legs and fixing his eyes on those of the young man, he waited.

Lord Ewald, having also sat down, began:

— I was asking myself, in the first place, why you questioned me so particularly on the intellectual character of our female *subject*?

— Because I had to know in what way you yourself conceive of Intelligence, Edison replied. You have to understand that the least troublesome of my jobs is mere physical reproduction. If the first preliminary is simply to give Hadaly the paradoxical beauty of your living lady, the really serious task is creating the Android in such a way that, far from disenchanting you as her model does, she will be worthy in your eyes



of the sublime body in which she will be incorporated. Unless I do that, there's no advantage in changing one for the other.

— How will you prevail on Alicia to lend herself to this experiment?

— It'll take no more than a few seconds during our supper tonight; you will see, I'll persuade her. If I used *Suggestion* to decide her . . . but, no, persuasion will be enough. After that, it will be a matter of a dozen sittings, in the presence of a terra-cotta model, which will disarm her suspicions. She will never even see Hadaly, and will never conceivably suspect what we're up to.

Now, we want Hadaly to take on a human appearance, and to leave this almost supernatural atmosphere within which the fiction of her being is taking shape. Accordingly, it's essential, don't you agree, that this Valkyrie of Science must take on a contemporary shape in order to live among us. She has to assume the customs, habits, and the appearance of a woman, as well as the conventional contemporary dress.

That's why, during these various sittings, dressmakers, glove makers, corsetiers, milliners, and boot makers will exactly duplicate the entire wardrobe of Miss Alicia Clary, who, without even noticing what is happening, will yield all of her secrets to her beautiful shadow, as soon as the latter comes forth into the world. Once all the measurements have been taken for a complete wardrobe, you can have a thousand others made, of every sort, without her even having to try them on.

It goes without saying that the Android will use the same perfumes as her model, and will have, as I explained to you, exactly the same natural odors.

— And how does she travel?

— But just like anyone else! Edison replied. Plenty of travelers are stranger than she will be! Miss Hadaly, once *warned* that she's going on a trip, will behave irreproachably. A bit sleepy and silent perhaps, not talking in fact to anyone but you, very softly and at rare intervals; but even if she's seated right next to a stranger, there is no reason for her to lower her veil. No, neither by day nor at night. And besides, you will travel alone, I suppose, my lord? Well, what problem do you foresee? She can challenge the keenest human sight.

— An occasion might arise when some words could legitimately be addressed to her, couldn't it?

— In that case you would simply remark that the lady is a foreigner and "doesn't know the language," which would close the incident. When you're on board a ship, where, for example, the simple problem of equilibrium is very considerable *even for us*, I can assure you that Miss Hadaly won't subject you to any of those difficult crossings during



which living ladies take to their hammocks anytime the sea is rough, or undergo sudden drastic fits of seasickness, painful to the point of being ridiculous. Hadaly knows nothing of these ailments; and in order not to humiliate, by her calm, fellow travelers whose organisms are more defective than hers, she can make her sea voyages after the fashion of the dead.

— You mean, in one of our coffins!? Lord Ewald asked in surprise.

Gravely Edison bowed his head in sign of affirmation.

— But . . . not sewed up in a gravecloth, I imagine? the young man murmured.

— Oh, as a living work of art who has never known swaddling clothes, she has nothing to do with shrouds, either. See here: among her other treasures, the Android possesses a heavy coffin of ebony lined with black satin. The interior of this symbolic jewel case will be molded precisely to the feminine form it is to contain. That is her dowry. The panels of the top open at the touch of a small golden key shaped like a star; the lock, when it's open, is kept under the pillow of the sleeper.

Hadaly knows how to enter her coffin by herself, either clothed or unclothed; she can lie down there, and fasten herself in, using strips of batiste solidly fastened to the interior walls, so that the lining of the casket does not even touch her shoulders. Her face is veiled; her head, with its crown of hair, rests on a cushion against which it is held by a jeweled band that keeps it motionless. If it were not for her constant gentle breathing, you would think she was Miss Alicia Clary, who had died just that very morning.

On the closed panels of this prison is fastened a silver plaque, bearing the name HADALY in the identical letters that in Iranian signify the IDEAL. Above it will be your ancient coat of arms, which will sanctify this captivity.

This handsome coffin should be placed in a cedar chest carefully lined inside; its simple rectangular shape will provoke no comment. This precious jail of your dream will be ready in three weeks. Then, when you go back to London, a word to the customs office on the Thames will suffice to get your mysterious parcel into the country.

When Miss Alicia Clary receives your farewell note, you will be in your castle of Athelwold, where you can resurrect her shadow . . . the celestial one.

— In my country house? . . . Yes, in fact, there it would be possible! Lord Ewald murmured, as if to himself, as if lost in a terrible melancholy.

— There and only there, in that cloudy countryside, surrounded by pine forests, bleak lakes, and enormous rocks, there you will be able



to open, in perfect security, the prison of Hadaly. I suppose you have in that castle of yours some spacious, splendid apartment furnished after the fashion of Queen Elizabeth's days?

— I do, said Lord Ewald with a bitter smile. And in happier days I took the pains to decorate it myself with all sorts of marvelous artworks and precious ornaments. The old room addresses the spirit only in the voice of the past. The single enormous stained glass window, hung in ancient drapes embroidered with lilies in gold thread, opens onto an iron balcony whose railing, still impeccable, was forged under the reign of Richard III. A stairway buried in moss leads down into our ancient park, through which shaggy, overgrown pathways reach away ever further under the shadow of giant oaks.

I had intended this royal room for the fiancée of my life, if ever I had discovered her.

Lord Ewald, after a mournful shudder, continued.

— Well, so be it! I shall be trying to achieve the Impossible; yes, that is where I will bring this delusive apparition, this galvanized phantom of hope! And since I can no longer love or desire or possess *the other* . . . the other phantom . . . I can hope that this vacant form may become the abysm on whose gloomy edge I can sit watching my final hopes fade from view.

— Indeed: this house is the very place best suited to the Android, I agree, said Edison solemnly. You see how it is; though I'm not much of a dreamer myself, I readily associate myself with the vision of your soul, which is dear to me on other scores. Only there in your house Hadaly will be like a mysterious sleepwalker, wandering about the lakes or across forbidden heaths. In this solitary castle, where your old servants, your books, your huntsmen, and your musical instruments all await you, both persons and objects will quickly become accustomed to the new arrival.

She will walk surrounded by a halo of reverence and silence, since your servants will have been told never to address a word to her. You can say, for example, if you have to justify that order, that in consequence of a great danger from which you rescued her, this solitary companion of yours has made a vow never to speak to anyone but you.

There her angelic singing, in that voice which is dear to you, accompanied by the organ or whenever you choose by a splendid American piano, will spread through the majestic autumn evenings, rising above the whisperings of the breeze. Her accents will deepen the charm of summer evenings and explode across the beauty of the dawn, mingled with the songs of the birds. A legend will cluster about the folds of her long dress, when people will have seen her pass, alone, across the lawns



of your park, wandering through the afternoon sunshine or straying under the brilliance of a starry night. An unforgettable spectacle, of which nobody will know the incredible secret, except you. Perhaps one day I shall come to visit you in this half-solitude where you have undertaken to defy two constant dangers: madness and God.

— You will be the only guest I shall receive, replied Lord Ewald. But since the *conceivability* of this adventure is now established, let us see if the miracle itself is possible, and what unheard-of means you will use to bring it about.

— Agreed, said Edison. But I should warn you that knowing the mechanism of the puppet will never explain to you how it becomes the phantom — any more than the skeleton that lies beneath the surface of Miss Alicia Clary can possibly explain to you how *her* mechanism, integrated with the beauty of her flesh, idealizes itself to the point of developing those contours on which your entire love is founded.

## CHAPTER IX

### Ambiguous Pleasantries

*Guess, or I devour you.*

— The Sphinx

— Every torch needs a match, the electrician continued. However clumsy it may be in itself, this method of striking a light, don't we finally admire it when the light comes forth? Someone skeptical in advance about this method of making light, someone who was so shocked at it that he wouldn't even try to put it into practice, wouldn't even deserve to seek the light, would he? I'm right, am I not? Well, what we're going to talk about is nothing but the *human machine* of Hadaly; that's what our doctors call it. If you're already familiar with the charm of the Android when she's *fully completed*, as you already know the charm of her model, no explanation can keep you from feeling that charm — any more than seeing the flayed skin of your living beauty would prevent you from loving her still, if afterward she appeared before your eyes *as she is today*.

The electrical apparatus of Hadaly is no more her *self* than the skeleton of your friend is her personality. In a word, when one loves a woman it isn't for one particular joint, nerve, bone, or muscle; rather, I think, it's for the unique ensemble of her being, penetrated as it is with her organic fluids — because, with a simple glance of her eyes, she



transfigures this whole concatenation of minerals, metals, and vegetable matter which have been fused and purified into the stuff of her body.

The unity generated by these various radiant techniques is the only mysterious thing about them. Let us not forget, my lord, that we are about to talk of a vital process that is just as ridiculous as our own, one that can shock us only by its . . . novelty.

— Good, said Lord Ewald, with a grave smile. Let me begin then. A first question: why the armor?

— The armor? said Edison. I explained that before. It is the plastic scaffolding on which will be overlaid, penetrating it and penetrated itself by the unity of the electric fluid, the fleshy incarnation of your ideal friend. It contains within itself the interior organism common to all women. In just a moment we shall be studying it on Hadaly herself, who will be amused and delighted, no doubt, at the prospect of displaying the mysteries of her luminous being.

— Does the Android always talk with the voice I heard? asked Lord Ewald.

— Can you seriously ask such a question, my lord? cried Edison. No, a thousand times no! Didn't Miss Alicia's voice once undergo changes? The voice you have heard in Hadaly is her childhood voice, wholly spiritual, like the voice of a sleepwalker, not yet feminine! She will have the voice of Miss Alicia Clary, as she will have all the rest of her properties. The songs and words of the Android will forever be those that your lovely friend will have dictated to her — unknowingly, without ever laying eyes on her. Her accent, her diction, her intonations, down to the last millionth of a vibration, will be inscribed on the discs of two golden phonographs . . . perfected miraculously by me to the point where now they are of a tonal fidelity . . . practically . . . *intellectual!* These are the lungs of Hadaly. An electric spark sets them in motion, as the spark of life sets ours in motion. I should warn you that these fabulous songs, these extraordinary dramatic scenes and unsounded words, spoken first by the living artiste, captured on records, and then given new *seriousness* by her Android phantom, are precisely what constitute the miracle and also the hidden peril of which I warned you.

Lord Ewald was shaken by these words. He had not dreamed of this explanation of *the Voice*, that virginal voice of the lovely phantom. He had simply wondered. Now the simplicity of the solution erased his smile. The dark possibility — still much disturbed, no doubt, but still a *possibility* — of the total miracle, appeared before him distinctly.

More resolved than ever to learn where the extraordinary inventor could be leading, he renewed his questioning:



— Two phonographs of *gold*? Was that what you said? No doubt they are a good deal more handsome than ordinary lungs. But why gold?

— In fact, they are of virgin gold, said Edison, laughing.

— Why?

— Because, in addition to the fact that it yields a more feminine resonance, more sensitive and more exquisite, especially when it's treated in a certain way, gold has the marvelous quality of not oxidizing. You might take notice that in order to create a woman I had to have recourse to the rarest and most precious of substances. It's a circumstance very flattering to the fair sex, the electrician added gallantly. — Still, he added, I had to use iron for the joints.

— Ah? said Lord Ewald, lost in a dream; you had to use iron for the joints?

— No doubt about it, said Edison: of course it's one of the important elements making up our own blood, our own bodies. Under many circumstances, doctors prescribe it. It's only natural to include a component without which Hadaly would not have been altogether... human.

— Why particularly in the joints? asked Lord Ewald.

— A joint consists of a socket and a head that fits into it. In Hadaly's structure, the socket is a magnet powered by electricity; and as the metal on which magnetism works best (better by far than nickel or cobalt), iron in the form of steel is what I have had to use for the heads of her bones.

— Really? said Lord Ewald placidly. But iron and steel oxidize; your joints will rust.

— *Ours* do, indeed, said Edison. But here on my shelf is a bottle of oil of roses, heavily perfumed, tightly stoppered, which will lubricate the joint as well as any synovial membrane.

— Oil of *roses*? queried Lord Ewald.

— Yes; it's the only one that, when it's prepared in this fashion, does not evaporate. Besides, perfumes are appropriately feminine. Once a month, you'll slip about a teaspoonful through Hadaly's lips while she seems to be napping; it's a bit like dealing with a woman when she's suffering from one of her mysterious ailments. You see, she's Humanity incarnate. As for the subtle essence, it will spread throughout the magneto-metallic systems of Hadaly. This bottle is more than enough for a century of use; I don't think, my lord, there will be occasion to renew the supply.

There was a touch of sinister levity in the engineer's last word.

— You say she breathes?



— Always; exactly like us, said Edison. But without consuming oxygen! We burn the stuff up, you and I, rather like steam engines: but Hadaly takes air in and out by the automatic, unvarying movement of her breast, which rises and falls like that of an ideal woman who's always in good health. The air, as it passes through her lips and delicate nostrils, will be gently warmed by electricity and perfumed with the soft scent of ambergris and roses, the lingering recollection of her oriental elixir.

The normal posture of the future Alicia (I'm talking of the *real*, not of the living woman) will be to sit or lean with her cheek in her hand . . . or else to stretch out on a sofa . . . or on a bed, just like a woman.

She will remain there without any movement other than her breathing.

To rouse her to her mysterious existence, all you need do is take her by the hand, setting in motion the fluid in one of her rings.

— One of her rings? demanded Lord Ewald.

— Yes, Edison replied, that on her index finger; it's her wedding band. He gestured at the ebony table.

— Do you understand why that surprising hand and arm responded to the pressure of your hand, just a moment ago?

— Certainly not, replied Lord Ewald.

— It was because when you grasped it, you put a bit of pressure on the ring, said Edison. Now Hadaly, if you noticed, has rings on all her fingers, and the various stones set into them are all *sensitive*. Outside of those long, otherworldly scenes of intimacy (scenes during which you will have no reason to be concerned with her, since she will carry those hours *completely* inscribed in her person, so that they will constitute in effect her personality), there may be moments when, without wanting to call anything so sublime from her, you will simply want to ask her one thing or another. Well, on such an occasion, whether she's seated or lying down, she will gently rise up, if you simply take her right hand, rub softly the amethyst on the ring of her index finger, and say to her, "Come, Hadaly," she will come to you, better than the living woman. Your pressure on the ring should be light and *natural* — as when you press softly and with a bit of tender feeling the hand of the model. But such nuances are necessary only in the interests of the illusion.

Hadaly will walk straight ahead and quite unaided if you touch the ruby placed on the middle finger of her right hand; or, taking an arm, and supporting herself languidly on it, she will follow the movements of a friend, not just like a woman but in *exactly* the same way that Miss Alicia Clary does. That's a concession you must make to her *human*



*machine* by manipulating those rings — but it shouldn't scandalize you. Think of the various other prayers and invocations, much more humiliating than these, to which lovers sometimes resort in order to obtain a pale moment of affection. Think of all the hypocrisies to which Don Juan himself must condescend in order to bring some willful little baggage to a semblance of obedience . . . Living women too have rings one must press.

Touch ever so gently the turquoise on her ring finger, and she will sit down. Besides all these rings, she has a necklace, every pearl of which has a specific correspondence. A completely explicit Manuscript (a magician's formula book in which you can't go astray!) — something absolutely unique under the heavens, of which she will make you a gift — will provide a guide for you through the subtleties of her character. With a little experience (ah, you realize! a woman takes some knowing!) — everything will become *natural* for you.

Throughout this speech the gravity of Edison's expression was absolute.

— As for her diet . . . he resumed.

— What's that? interrupted Lord Ewald, gazing fixedly into the steady eyes of Edison.

— You seem surprised, my lord? Edison said equably. Perhaps you were expecting to let this admirable creature die of hunger? It would be worse than murder.

— What do you mean by her diet, my dear magician? cried Lord Ewald. This time, I declare, the thing surpasses my wildest dreams.

— This is the nourishment that Hadaly takes, once or twice a week, Edison continued. I have in this old trunk various boxes of lozenges and pills she takes of her own accord, strange little girl that she is. It's quite enough to place a container of them on a table at some fixed distance from her bedside, and point it out to her by touching lightly one of the pearls in her necklace.

She's a mere child in everything that pertains to this world; she simply doesn't know. You must teach her. We all start in her condition, yes, you and I as well. Indeed, she seems to have trouble remembering; but we, too, often forget, sometimes for our own good.

She drinks from a dainty cup of jasper, made specially for her, and her manner of drinking is exactly like that of her model. Her cup should be full of fresh water, filtered ahead of time through charcoal, that is to say, very pure, and then mixed with various salts for which you will find a formula in the Manuscript. As for the lozenges and pills, they are lozenges of zinc and pills of potassium dichromate, sometimes per-



oxide of lead. Today we humans take a whole mass of medications borrowed from chemistry; she is no different. You see for yourself, she is very temperate, and takes only what she needs. Happy the humans who can follow her example! I should say that when she doesn't find at hand the nourishment she wants when she wants it, she faints — or, more precisely, she dies.

— She dies? murmured the young lord with a smile.

— Yes, so as to give her chosen lover the really divine pleasure of reviving her.

— A delicate attention! Lord Ewald replied almost gaily.

— When she remains motionless and closes her eyes, a glass of very fresh water and a few lozenges and pills will bring her back to herself. However, as she may not have the strength to take them herself, it may be necessary to bring the tourmaline of her middle finger in contact with an electric battery. That's all she will need. Her first word after waking up will be to ask for some fresh water. At this point, because of the harsh metallic odor that will remain in her from the stale water of an interior crystal goblet, you must not forget to infuse the first cupful with various reactive agents, for which you will find the formulas and the dosage in the Manuscript. Their effect on this discolored water is instantaneous. Next you place the induction wire on the black diamond of her little finger, which connects with an alternator capable of heating a strip of platinum white-hot in a second. Then you drop into *your* personal battery the element of carbon which was withheld perforce while you were connecting the wire. During this process you won't forget to make use of the appropriate energizing instruments.

I'm sure you're well aware that glass which has been tempered, even by ordinary processes, can withstand a temperature equivalent to that of molten lead. Well, mine would withstand the temperature of melting platinum, and that even when it is less than half the thickness of the crystal goblet located within the Android, between her two lungs. Thus the heat created within this crystal by the current transmitted through the diamond is of a *quality* that instantly raises the temperature there to around four hundred degrees. This is more than enough to vaporize the sterilized water very quickly. Meanwhile the reactive agents of which I spoke to you, working on the atomic structure of the metallic substances tainting the water, draw them out and reduce them in a few seconds to a sort of dust, very white and very light. A moment later our lovely Hadaly will give forth from her half-closed lips little puffs of pale smoke, colored with this dust, which has no odor other than that of boiling water, mildly perfumed, to be sure, by contact with the



distilled oil of roses of which I told you. In a matter of six seconds the inner crystal will be clear and pure again. Then Hadaly takes a glass of pure water and a couple of her lozenges; and there she is again, as alive as you or me, ready to obey all her rings and all her pearls, just as we obey all of our impulses.

— You mean it? She emits puffs of smoke from between her lips? Lord Ewald demanded.

— Just as we do ourselves all the time, Edison replied, indicating the cigars they were both holding. Only she doesn't keep in her mouth the slightest trace of metallic dust or of smoke. The fluid consumes and dissipates everything in an instant. If you want to justify it, you can just think she's fond of smoking her hookah...

— I noted a dagger at her belt?

— It's a weapon that no man could possibly parry, and every blow it deals is mortal. Hadaly makes use of it to defend herself in the event that, during her lord's absence, some visitor might try to take advantage of her apparent slumber. She does not forgive the slightest offense; she recognizes only her one chosen man.

— She can't see, however? asked Lord Ewald.

— Bah! Who knows? replied Edison. We don't see all that well ourselves, for that matter. In any case, she intuits or knows by experience where her heart lies. Hadaly is, let me remind you again, a slightly somber child, who knows nothing of death itself and inflicts it readily.

— So the first comer would be unable to disarm her?

— As for that, Edison declared with a laugh, I'll challenge any Hercules on earth to try it, or for that matter any creature on earth, in the sky, or under the ocean.

— How so?

— Because whenever she chooses to exercise it, the arm holding this weapon wields the power of a thunderbolt, said the inventor.

A tiny opal on the little finger of the left hand is the secret switch that connects the apparatus of the blade with an extremely powerful current. The noise of the spark, which is about a foot long, is muffled within her body; apart from that, it's like a miniature lightning bolt. The gay trifler, the merry rake who tries, for example, to "snatch a kiss" from this sleeping beauty will find himself rolling on the floor, his face blackening, his limbs broken, struck down by a silent stroke of thunder beneath the feet of Hadaly, before his finger even grazed her dress. She is a faithful friend.

— Ah, that's right! So it would be! murmured Lord Ewald. The kiss of this gallant would close a circuit.



— This is the special wand with which one touches the beryl finger in order to neutralize the current of the opal; the dagger now drops harmlessly to her side. I made the wand of specially tempered glass, tough as any metal; the formula was lost in the days of the emperor Nero, but I rediscovered it.

And seizing a long glittering wand that lay beside him, Edison swung it violently against the ebony table. The glittering star at its tip resounded; the stem bent but did not break.

There was a moment of silence. Then, as if in jest, Lord Ewald asked:

— Does she take baths?

— But every day, *naturally!* replied the engineer, as if astonished at the question.

— Ah! said the Englishman drily. And how is that managed?

— You know very well that all photochromatic prints should stay at least several hours in a special solution that reinforces them. Well, here the photochromatic action of which I've already spoken is indelible, since the Epidermis on which it's printed has been impregnated with a fluoride solution that renders it permanent and waterproof. A little rosy pearl on the left side of her necklace just above the breasts controls an inner arrangement of ports which hermetically seal the bath water away from the inner workings of the bather. You will find in the Manuscript a list of the various perfumes of which this semi-vital being makes use for her baths. I will also record on the Cylinder of Gestures that magnificent toss of the hair that you mentioned to me as typical of your beloved when she leaves her bath. Hadaly, with her customary gift for creating a perfect illusion, will reproduce it precisely.

— The Cylinder of Gestures? queried Lord Ewald.

— Ah, that! I'll show it to you down there, said Edison, smiling. You must have it before your eyes if I'm to explain it. But for the moment you see, if I may summarize, that Hadaly is in the first place a superlative machine for creating visions, almost a creature in her own right, a stunning likeness. The faults that I've left in her, out of politeness to Humanity, are simply a consequence of the fact that there are women of several sorts in her, as there are in every living woman. (But in her you can erase them.) She is multiple, in other words, like the world of dreams. But the supreme type who dominates these visions, HADALY herself, is, if I may use the word, perfection. As for the other characters, she *plays* them; she's a marvelous actress, endowed, if you'll take my word, with a talent far more concentrated, more sure of itself, and certainly much more *serious* than that of Miss Alicia Clary.



— After all, though, she isn't a *being*! said Lord Ewald gloomily.

— Oh! As for that, the world's most powerful minds have always been asking themselves what is this notion of Being, considered in itself. Hegel, through the prodigious process of his dialectic, has demonstrated that when you consider the pure idea of Being, the difference between that and Nothingness is simply a matter of opinion. Hadaly, all by herself, will resolve every question you have about her BEING, and without any help from me, I promise you that.

— By words?

— By words.

— But *without a soul*, will she have any consciousness?

Edison stared at Lord Ewald in amazement.

— I beg your pardon. *Isn't that exactly what you asked for when you cried out, WHO WILL TAKE AWAY THIS SOUL FROM THIS BODY FOR ME?* You called for a phantom, identical with your young friend *but without the consciousness with which she seemed to be afflicted*. Hadaly has come in answer to your call; that's all there is to it.

Lord Ewald remained thoughtful and grave.

## CHAPTER X

### Così Fan Tutte

*A woman never separates her likings from her taste.*

— La Bruyère

— Besides, Edison resumed jovially, do you suppose it's any great loss for Miss Hadaly to be deprived of a consciousness like that of her model? Isn't she, to the contrary, much better off without it? At least you must think so, since the "consciousness" of Miss Alicia Clary seems to you a deplorable superfluity, an original sin against the masterpiece of her body. And then, the "consciousness" of a woman! I mean, *a woman of the world!* . . . Oh! Oh! What a notion! It's an idea that once baffled a council of the Church. A woman only sees things according to her personal inclinations, and twists all her "judgments" to conform with the opinions of the man she's attracted to. A woman may be married ten times over, be sincere every time, and yet be ten different persons. Her Consciousness, you say? But this gift of the Holy Spirit, Consciousness, takes the primary form of an aptitude for intellectual friendship. In the days of the ancient republics, any young man who couldn't by the age of twenty years prove that he had a friend, a kind of second self, was



declared a reprobate, an *infamous person*, in short. History knows a thousand examples of admirable friends — *all male*: Damon and Pythias, Pylades and Orestes, Achilles and Patroclus, and many more. Name me two women who were friends, in all the course of human history. The thing is impossible. Why? Because each woman knows her own mental emptiness too well ever to be the dupe of another. Just notice the expression with which one modern woman looks at the dress of another, turning as she passes to look her over, and you will be forever persuaded of it. From the aspect of her emotional life one vanity of vanities dominates or vitiates all her best intentions; to be loved is for her (and in spite of all her protestations) almost always a secondary consideration. All she really wants is to be *preferred*. That's the single word demanded by this sphinx. That's the reason why each of our lovely flowers of civilization (it's a rule to which there are very few exceptions) always despises a bit the man who loves her, because by that very circumstance he becomes guilty of the awful crime *of being unable to compare her with the others*.

At bottom, modern love (if it is not, as contemporary physiology would have it, simply a matter of mucous membranes) looks to a physical scientist like a mere matter of equilibrium between a magnet and electricity. Thus Consciousness, without being wholly alien to the phenomenon, is perhaps indispensable only in one of the two poles. It's an axiom confirmed by a thousand experiments every day, notably those involving Suggestion. And this is why you suffice. — But I'd better stop here, said Edison, with a laugh. What I'm saying seems to me to bear on a larger number of living women. Fortunately, we're by ourselves here.

— Unhappy as a woman has made me, murmured Lord Ewald, I still think you talk of women with a great deal of severity.

## CHAPTER XI

### Chivalric Discourse

*Consolatrix of the afflicted.*

— Christian litanies

The electrician raised his gaze.

— Just a moment, my lord! he said.

Will you be good enough to note that in these remarks I place myself not at all in the sphere of Love but simply on the level of



so-called lovers. If we change the basis of the question and depart from the sphere of carnal desire, oh, then I'll express myself in an entirely different manner. If among the women of our own race — the only ones who matter to us, since we cannot take seriously, that is, *choose for our own* a Kaffir, a Polynesian, a Turk, a Chinese, a Red Indian, and so on — if, I say, among those of our race who no longer have in their blood a trace of the cattle or the slave, we consider those purified, elevated spirits, consecrated by prolonged dedication to duty, by self-abnegation and free devotion — surely I should think myself strange indeed if I didn't bow my spirit before those women who freely and gladly allow their wombs to be torn apart repeatedly, so that we may be allowed to think! How can one forget that on this stellar speck, lost in a corner of the boundless abyss, on this invisible half-cooled atom, there live so many chosen spirits from the upper atmosphere of Love, so many wonderful life-companions! I won't even try to recall all those thousands of virgins who in olden days smiled amid the flames and in the butchery of the torture chamber on behalf of some faith that by a sublime process transfigured their instinct into pure soul; and I pass by, as well, all those mysterious heroines, among whom glitter particularly the liberators of their countries, and those who, while being dragged off under the chains and into the slavery of defeat, affirmed to their husbands — even as they expired in a lingering, bloodstained kiss — that steel has no power over the living spirit! And I omit also all account of those numberless women of spirit who endured unknown humiliations, endlessly devoted to the destitute, the suffering, the out-cast and abandoned, asking nothing more in recompense than the hard, mocking smile of those other women who did not imitate them. For there are, and there always will be, women who will be fully inspired by some principle more lofty than that of Pleasure. *Such women have nothing to do, don't you agree, either with this laboratory or with the question that lies between us?* We make a categorical exception of these noble flowers of Humanity, radiant arrivals from the *real, true* world of Love; and then, considering only the women that one can buy or conquer, I will uphold the thesis I just expressed as absolute and unbreakable. A point that allows us to conclude once more with a word from Hegel: "It amounts to the same thing, whether you say a word once or repeat it for eternity."



## CHAPTER XII

## Travelers into the Ideal: The Trail Divides!

*They reached the Sea of Shadows, in order to discover what it contained.*

— Ptolemy Hephaestion, Nubian geographer

Lord Ewald rose without replying to these last words and slipped into his enormous fur coat, put on his hat, buttoned his gloves, adjusted his monocle, and lit a new cigar.

— You have an answer for everything, my dear Edison, said he. We can leave whenever you're ready.

— Right away, then, said Edison, following suit; we've lost half an hour already. The train from New York to Menlo Park will arrive in one hundred fifty-six minutes, that's a bit more than two hours and a half—and we'll need just under an hour and three-quarters to run through the outlines of the experiment.

The room where Hadaly lives is underground, and at some distance from here. As you can well understand, I couldn't leave the Ideal around where just anyone could get at her. Despite the long nights and years of work that this Android has cost me, in the midst of my other work, she has remained my secret.

See here now. I've discovered under this house of mine, at a depth of several hundred feet, two enormous underground caves, formerly the burial grounds of the aboriginal Algonquin tribes who in ancient ages used to inhabit this area. These grave mounds are by no means rare in the States, particularly in New Jersey. I've brought in a heavy layer of basalt from the volcanoes of the Andes in order to reinforce the earthen walls of the main cave. In the second I have stored, with all reverence, the mummified bodies and powdery bones of our sachems, and then closed up the entrance to this underground cemetery, no doubt forever.

The first room is therefore that of Hadaly and her birds (for I had a lingering superstitious feeling that I shouldn't leave all alone this daughter of my mind). It's a little like fairyland, this kingdom of hers. Everything works by means of Electricity. Or rather, it's like lightning land, I'd say, full of high-tension currents deriving from my most powerful generators. And that's the habitat of our taciturn Hadaly. She, another person, and myself are the only ones who know the road. Although the journey there offers, as you'll see, certain difficulties for an outsider



who undertakes it, I should be surprised if anything untoward happened to us this evening. Apart from that, our furs will protect us from pneumonia, which the long underground tunnel might otherwise bring down on us. We will go like an arrow.

— It's completely fantastic! said Lord Ewald with a smile.

— My lord, said Edison, glancing shrewdly at his interlocutor, here's a bit of humor that you've recovered already! It's a good sign.

They stood together a moment, muffled and motionless, lighted cigars at their lips, their long fur coats drawn tightly around them, the collars pushed up under their hats.

The electrician led the way; both walked toward the shadowy end of the laboratory and toward the wall, now massive and impenetrable, from behind which Hadaly had appeared.

— I must confess, Edison continued, that when I'm in need of solitude, I go to visit this sorceress who dispels all cares. Above all, when the fire dragon of a discovery is beating his invisible wings within my head, I come here where I can only be overheard by her if I talk to myself. After a while I return to the surface of the earth, my problem solved. She is my own private nymph, my Egeria.

Even as he spoke these joking words, the engineer touched the controls of a small switch; the current flowed, the panels of the wall opened as if by magic.

— Let's go down!, said Edison, since it seems that in order to discover the Ideal, we must first pass through the kingdom of the moles.

Then he gestured to the mass of solid draperies:

— After you, my lord, he murmured, with a grave and stately bow.



## BOOK III

## AN UNDERGROUND EDEN

## CHAPTER I

## Easy Is the Descent into Avernus

*Mephistopheles: Up or down, it's all the same.*

— Goethe, *Faust*, Part II

Both stepped across the luminous threshold.

— Hold on to this support, said Edison, indicating to Lord Ewald a ring of metal. He seized it. The Engineer grasped a handle hidden behind the dark curtains and pulled it vigorously.

A square of white pavement shifted gently under their feet; it dropped straight down, guided by four steel rails at the corners. This, then, was the artificial tombstone that had raised Hadaly before them previously.

For several minutes Edison and Lord Ewald continued to descend in this fashion; the light above them receded in the distance. The pit was evidently very deep.

— An odd way to go looking for the Ideal! thought Lord Ewald, standing by his silent companion.

Their platform continued to sink into the earth.

Shortly, both were enveloped in absolute darkness. The atmosphere was damp and smelled of the earth; their breath condensed in it.

The moving marble never paused or hesitated; the light above looked no bigger than a star; they must have been far indeed from that last glimmer of humanity.

It disappeared completely. Lord Ewald felt himself in a bottomless pit. But he said nothing to break the silence of the electrician by his side.

Now the swiftness of their descent increased to the point that their support seemed to fall away beneath them. The platform whirled through the darkness, making a monotonous noise.

Suddenly Lord Ewald pricked up his ears; he seemed to hear somewhere near him a melodious voice, mingled with bursts of laughter and other cries.

The speed diminished gradually, there was a soft jolt.

A luminous porch turned silently to face the two travelers, as if some "Open, sesame!" had made it swing on enchanted hinges. An odor of



roses and musk, a sense of absolute languor, filled the air.

The young man found himself in a spacious underground chamber, like those which in former days, under the palaces of Baghdad, served to fulfill the fantasies of the caliphs.

— Enter, my lord, you've already been introduced, said Edison, who was swiftly fastening the rings of the vehicle to two heavy cast-iron grills built into the rock alongside it.

## CHAPTER II

### Enchantments

*The air is so soft there, it keeps one from dying.*

— Flaubert, *Salammbô*

Lord Ewald stepped forward over the pelts of wild beasts covering the floor and surveyed this new scene.

A powerful pale blue light flooded the entire immense area. At intervals, enormous pillars supported the basalt dome, forming galleries to the right and left of the entry as far as the center of the hall. Their decoration, modifying the ancient Syrian style, converted them from base to capital into giant sheaves of wheat, with silver morning glories intertwined against a bluish background. At the center of the vault, dangling from a long golden wire, hung a giant lamp, blazing like a star, but with its electric rays softened by a blue shade. The vault itself, jet black and of enormous height, loomed with the solidity of the tomb over the brilliance of this fixed star: it was the very image of Heaven as it appears, black and threatening, from far outside the atmosphere of our planet.

The half circle that formed the rear of the room opposite the entry ascended on either side in elegant slopes like gardens; and there, under the caress of an imaginary breeze, swayed thousands of tropical vines and oriental roses, Polynesian flowers with their petals drenched in perfume, their pistils luminous, their leaves gleaming like green jewels. The allure of this Niagara of flowers was overwhelming. A flock of birds from Florida and the southern states of the Union chattered away throughout this artificial garden; a rainbow of bright colors seemed to rise over this part of the hall, and to radiate beams of light through prisms, from the height of the circular walls to the base of a great alabaster fountain at the center, within which an elegant plume of snowy water rose and fell in glittering drops.



From the entryway to the gardens on both sides, from the main circle of the vault to the furred rugs of the floor, the lower walls were hung with curtains of heavy cordovan leather, stamped with designs in gold.

Beside a pillar Hadaly, still heavily veiled, was standing erect, resting one hand on the case of a grand piano; lighted candles were reflected from its polished surface.

With youthful grace, she curtsied a quiet welcome to Lord Ewald.

On her shoulder a bird of paradise, superbly imitated, balanced daintily his crest of precious stones. With the voice of a youthful page, this bird seemed to be chatting with Hadaly in an unknown tongue.

A long table of cut porphyry, placed beneath a great silver-gilt lamp, reflected the light from its flawless surface; at one end was placed a silken cushion, like the one that in the laboratory supported the radiant arm. A surgeon's case, complete with glittering instruments, stood open on a little ivory shelf nearby.

In a corner, at some distance, a brasier of artificial flames which reflected off silver mirrors served to warm the splendid hall.

There were no furnishings apart from a couch of black satin, a small round table between two chairs, and on one of the walls, about the height of the lamp, a great ebony frame enclosing a white screen and crowned with a rose of gold.

### CHAPTER III

## Birdsongs

*Neither the song of the morning birds nor the night and its solemn owl...*

— Milton, *Paradise Lost*

On the rising garden plot of the flowery banks, a flock of birds, balanced atop the flowering plants, parodied Life to the extent that, while some of them were whetting their beaks and pluming their feathers, others had replaced the warble of birds with the sound of human laughter. Lord Ewald had scarcely taken a step or two when the whole flock of birds turned their heads toward him, stared at him at first in silence, and then burst all at once into a cackle of laughter, within which both male and female voices were heard. For a moment, the young man felt he was facing an assemblage of human beings. He stopped short, trying to come to some understanding of the situation.



—I suppose this is some pack of demons that this sorcerer Edison has shut up inside these birds of his, he thought, staring at the cacklers through his monocle.

The electrician, left behind in the darkness of the tunnel, was no doubt just finishing the job of tying up his fantastic elevator.

—My lord, he cried, I had forgotten! Our feathered friends are wel-coming you with a song. If I'd been warned in advance of what was going to befall us this evening, I could have spared you this chorus of derision, simply by cutting off the current from the battery that animates these featherheads. Hadaly's birds are nothing but winged condensers. I thought fit to give them human voices and human laughter instead of the old-fashioned, meaningless song of the normal bird — it seemed to me more in harmony with the Spirit of Progress. Real birds are so bad at repeating the words one teaches them! I thought it might be fun to catch on the phonograph a few admiring or curious phrases spoken by my occasional visitors, and then to install them in these birds by means of electricity — thanks to one of my still-undisclosed discoveries. But now Hadaly will make them stop. You needn't give them more than a moment of your attention, while I finish tying up the elevator. You understand, we don't want it playing any nasty tricks on us, like going back to the surface of the earth and leaving us down here.

Lord Ewald looked once more at the Android. Under the peaceful breathing of Hadaly the pale silver of her breast rose and fell. Suddenly the piano began to play the rich harmonies of a prelude, the keys moving by themselves as if under pressure from invisible fingers. And the gentle voice of the Android began to sing to this accompaniment, her voice coming from beneath the veil with intonations of supernatural voluptuousness:

All hail to you, young man without a grief!  
 Love cries her curses on me through the skies,  
 And woeful Hope berates me for a thief.  
 Flee me, then! Get you gone! Shut tight your eyes,  
 And spurn me as you would a withered leaf!

Listening to this unanticipated song, Lord Ewald felt himself overwhelmed by a kind of fearful amazement.

Then, on the flower-crowded slopes there began a kind of witch's sabbath, absurd enough to make one dizzy, and yet with a kind of infernal overtone. Frightful squawking noises, as of random visitors, poured



from the throats of the birds; they were cries of admiration, questions either banal or preposterous, canned laughter and applause, occasional deafening snorts as of noses being blown, offers of money.

At a gesture from Hadaly, this parody of Glory was instantly cut off.

Lord Ewald turned his eyes once again to the Android, in silence.

Suddenly the pure voice of a nightingale rang through the shadows. All the other birds fell silent, as they do in a forest when the voice is heard of the prince of the night. This seemed an enchantment. Was the foolish bird actually singing underground? No doubt the dark black veil of Hadaly suggested to him the night, and he mistook the lamp for moonlight.

The flow of delicious melody terminated in a ripple of melancholy notes. This voice, coming straight from nature and recalling the forests, the skies, and the immensity of space, seemed strange indeed in this place.

#### CHAPTER IV

### God

*God is the place of spirits, as space is the place of bodies.*

— Malebranche

Lord Ewald listened.

— It is a lovely voice, is it not, my lord Celian? said Hadaly.

— Yes, replied Lord Ewald, eyeing curiously the dark, indiscernible figure of the Android. Yes, it is the work of God.

— Then, *she* said, you must admire it; but don't try to understand how it is produced.

— What would be the danger if I tried? Lord Ewald asked, with a smile.

— God would withdraw from the song, Hadaly murmured placidly. Edison entered.

— We can take off our fur coats now, he said briskly, for the temperature is controlled here and always balmy. This is our lost Eden, rediscovered.

The two travelers slipped out of their heavy bearskin coats.

— But, the engineer continued (in the suspicious manner of a Bartholo, who sees his young mistress in conversation with an Almaviva), you were already having a chat, I believe? Don't let me interrupt you; go on, go on!



— What a strange idea you had there, my dear Edison, to give a real nightingale to an Android!

— Ah, the nightingale, said Edison with a chuckle. Well, the fact is, I'm a lover of Nature, so I am. I really was fond of the song of that bird, and his death a couple of months ago caused me, I assure you, genuine sadness.

— How's that? said Lord Ewald. The nightingale that was singing here died two months ago?

— Yes, said Edison; I recorded his final song. The phonograph that plays it here is actually twenty-five leagues away. It stands in a room of my New York house, on Broadway. I've connected it to a telephone, the wire of which reaches into my laboratory up above; an extension brings it into the cave, down to this group of blossoms, and culminates in this particular flower.

— You see, this is what sings; you can touch it, the stalk insulates it. It's a tube of tempered glass; the calix, where you see the light glowing, is the actual speaker. It's an imitation orchid, quite well made... more brilliant in color than those which perfume the brilliant clouds of dawn on the plateaus of Brazil and upper Peru.

As he explained this, Edison lit his cigar on the fiery heart of a rose camelia.

— You don't say! That nightingale who was singing from his heart is really dead? murmured Lord Ewald.

— Dead, you say? Not altogether, since I've recorded here his spirit. I evoke it by means of electricity; that's spiritualism put in really practical terms, right? And since the form taken by electricity here is nothing but heat, you can light your cigar at that harmless little glow, in the very same artificially perfumed flower where the bird's soul sings like a melodious light. You can light your cigar at the soul of that nightingale.

And the electrician stepped aside to manipulate various numbered switches in a small box set on the wall beside the door.

Lord Ewald, disturbed by the explanation, stood gloomily by. A chill lay on his heart.

Then he felt that someone was touching his shoulder; he turned around; it was Hadaly.

— Ah, she said softly, in a voice so melancholy that it made him shiver. That's how it is, you see!... *God has withdrawn from the song!*



## CHAPTER V

## Electricity

*Hail, holy Light, offspring of Heaven first-born!*

— Milton, *Paradise Lost*

— Miss Hadaly, said Edison, with a slight bow, we've just arrived from the Earth, and the trip has left us a bit thirsty.

Hadaly approached Lord Ewald.

— My lord, she said, would you prefer ale, or some sherry?

Lord Ewald hesitated a moment:

— Some sherry, if you please, he said.

The Android turned away to take from a shelf a salver on which glittered three Venetian glasses of opalescent hue, alongside a bottle of wine, still in its straw, and a fragrant box of heavy Havana cigars.

She placed the salver on a sideboard, poured the old Spanish wine, and then, taking two glasses in her glittering hands, presented them to her visitors.

Then, returning to fill the last glass, she turned around with a charming gesture, leaned against one of the columns of the cave, and, raising her glass almost to eye level, said in her melancholy voice:

— My lord, to your loves!

It was impossible for Lord Ewald to frown at this perhaps too free expression — so grave was the intonation of the toast, in the general silence of the room, so exquisite and graceful beyond all mere convention was the comportment of the speaker. The gentlemen were struck mute in admiration.

Hadaly gently tossed aside the wine of her glass. The fine sherry glittered in brilliant droplets as it fell to the floor like a fine dew of liquid gold.

— Thus, Hadaly said, in a slightly playful tone, I drink in spirit by means of Light.

— But come now, my dear enchanter, Lord Ewald said softly to Edison, how can Miss Hadaly reply *to the things I say to her*? To me it seems completely impossible that anyone could have foreseen my questions — above all to the extent of having engraved replies to them on discs of gold. This behavior, it seems to me, is enough to astound the most "realistic" man in the world — to use an expression belonging to that person we were discussing earlier.

Edison looked at the young Englishman without at first answering.



— Allow me to keep the secret of Hadaly to myself, at least for a while, he replied.

In response, Lord Ewald bowed slightly; then, like a man who, finding himself surrounded by marvels, resolves henceforth not to be astonished by anything, he sipped his sherry, placed the empty glass on a side table, tossed away his old cigar and took a new one from the box on Hadaly's salver, lit it as calmly as Edison had done at a luminous flower nearby — and then seated himself on an ivory stool, to wait until one or the other of his hosts should see fit to vouchsafe him some explanation.

But Hadaly had returned to her post by the piano.

— Do you see this swan? Edison resumed. It contains within it the voice of Alboni. With my new machine I made a record, in the course of a European concert and without the singer's knowledge, of Norma's prayer, "Casta diva," when that great artist was singing it. Ah, how deeply I regret that I wasn't on earth in the days of the famous Malibran!

The loudspeakers of all these so-called birds are tuned as precisely as Swiss chronometers. They operate by means of a current that reaches them through the stems of the flowers.

Though they are so small, they are capable of an enormous resonance, especially if we amplify it by means of my Microphone. This bird of Paradise could give you, all by himself and with just as much intelligence as the united brains of all the singers whose voices are contained in him, a complete rendition of Berlioz's *Faust* (orchestra, chorus, quartets, soloists, encores, applause from the audience, renewed applause, down to the vague, indistinct comments made by the listeners). To increase the volume, all we need do is multiply it by using the Microphone. As a result, if you were seated in a hotel room, placed this bird on the table, and adjusted the tiny speaker to your ear, you could have an entire concert to yourself without waking your neighbors. An immense volume of sound, worthy of an opera hall, would pour forth for you from this tiny rosy beak — so true it is that human hearing is an illusion like all the rest.

This hummingbird could recite for you Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from the beginning to end, without a prompter, and with all the expression of the very best tragic actors on our stage today.

These birds are the everyday musicians and actors of Hadaly; in their throats I have left untouched only the song of the nightingale — he is the only one in Nature who seems to me to have the right to sing. You understand that since Hadaly lives here, almost always alone, and several hundred feet underground, I felt bound to provide her with some distractions. What do you think of my aviary?



— You have here a sort of scientific positivism that puts to shame the imaginary world of the Arabian Nights! cried Lord Ewald.

— But you must also realize, Edison replied, what a marvelous Scheherazade I have here in Electricity! ELECTRICITY, my lord! People don't realize, in the world of high society, what minute but all-important steps it takes every day. But just think! Thanks to Electricity, the day is coming when there will be no more autocrats, no more cannons, no more battleships, no more dynamite or armies!

— That, I fear, is a mere dream, sighed Lord Ewald.

— My lord, there are no more dreams, the great engineer replied in an undertone.

He remained for a moment sunk in thought.

— Now, he resumed, since this is your desire, we are about to examine seriously the organ of this new electrohuman creature. THE FUTURE EVE, if you will, who with the aid of ARTIFICIAL GENERATION (already very much in vogue during recent years) seems destined within a century to fulfill the secret purpose of our species, at least among the advanced peoples. Let us forget, then, all questions that are foreign to this one. I think digressions — and don't you agree? — ought to be like those flying saucers, which children seem to throw at random to a great distance but which, thanks to an essential instinct of return built into the object itself, always return to the hand that threw them.

— But, Edison, said Lord Ewald, before we begin, would you be good enough to let me ask one last question; for it seems to me more interesting even than the examination you propose to make.

— What! Even here? Even before the experiment on which we agreed? said Edison, in surprise.

— Yes.

— What's your question? We're short of time; let's get on with it.

Lord Ewald raised his eyes to look directly into those of his friend.

— What seems to me the most mysterious thing of all, he said slowly, even more than this amazing creature, is *the reason that led you to create her*. Above all else, I should like to know how you first conceived this unheard-of notion.

To this very simple request Edison, after pondering a long time, replied slowly:

— Ah, that's *my* secret, my lord, and now you ask for it?

— I revealed my own to you, at your urgent request! Lord Ewald replied.

— Well, then, so be it! Edison cried. Besides, it's logical. Hadaly on the outside is nothing but a consequence of the inner Hadaly who took



shape within my brain. Knowing the full complex of reflections from which she derives, you will understand her all the better when she allows us, very shortly, to study her interior.

— My dear miss, he added brusquely, turning toward the motionless Android, would you be kind enough to leave us alone for a while, Lord Ewald and myself. The things I am going to tell him ought not to be heard by a young lady.

Without replying, Hadaly retired slowly toward the dark back of the cave, bearing aloft on her silver fingertips her bird of paradise.

— Now have a seat on this sofa, my lord, the engineer began. My story will take about twenty minutes to tell, but I think it has some points of interest.

And when the young man was seated, leaning on an elbow on the porphyry table:

— These are the reasons why I created Hadaly! said Edison.

## BOOK IV

### THE SECRET

#### CHAPTER I

#### Miss Evelyn Habal

*If the devil holds you by a hair, pray! Or you may lose  
your head.*

— Proverbs

He paused a moment, to collect his thoughts.

— In Louisiana some years ago, he began, I had a friend named Edward Anderson; he had been my friend since boyhood. He was a young man of great good sense, physically attractive, and a devoted companion. In just six years he had been able to liberate himself, honorably, from the clutches of poverty. I was present at his wedding, which was a joyful occasion, for he was marrying a woman whom he had loved for a long time.

Two years passed, during which his situation in life continually improved. In the world of commerce people considered him a judicious, substantial person, and a man of unusual energy. He was an inven-



tor as well. His trade being in cotton, he discovered a method of sizing and watering the cloth which was more economical by sixteen and a half percent than any previously used; as a result, he made a fortune.

A secure situation in life, two children, and a true helpmeet for life, an intelligent and contented wife, that amounted, for this fine young man, to a sufficient sum of happiness, wouldn't you say? One night in New York, however, at the conclusion of a banquet at which the end of the Civil War had been celebrated with rousing cheers, two of his dinner companions suggested that they all go off, to end the festive evening at the theater.

Anderson, as an exemplary husband and an early riser, rarely stayed out late, and he always felt uneasy away from home. But that very morning a little domestic quarrel had taken place, a completely futile argument with his wife, who had asked him *not to attend* that banquet, without being able to explain why she felt that way. Thus, sensing that his "character" was at stake, and not caring too much what he did, Anderson agreed to accompany his two friends. It's my own opinion that when a woman who loves us asks us *without any precise motive* not to do something, a man with real character will take her request into consideration. However . . .

At the opera, they were giving Gounod's *Faust*. Anderson was a bit dazzled by the theater lights and lulled by the music; before long, he was overcome by the sort of torpid, sluggish good fellowship that's the general consequence of such occasions.

Because of some remarks being made in the box next to his, his vague and wandering glance fell upon a very pretty little reddish blonde among the performers of the ballet. He glanced at her for a second, then turned his attention to the opera.

Between the acts, he could hardly avoid going to the bar with his two friends; and, once there, the fumes of the sherry prevented him from being fully aware that they were all going backstage.

He had never seen a theater from that vantage point; it was a curiosity, and he was much astonished by it.

Along came Miss Evelyn, the pretty redhead. The gentlemen spoke to her, and before long they were exchanging the banalities appropriate to the occasion, all more or less jokingly. She was indeed a very attractive child. Anderson, distracted by the busy scene around him, paid not the slightest attention to the dancer.

A minute or two later, his friends, who had been married for some time and maintained the usual modish double menage, were talking quite naturally of oysters and of a particular brand of champagne.



This time Anderson declined, as he certainly should have done, and in spite of the voluble insistence of his friends he was about to take his leave when the absurd memory of that little spat in the morning returned to his thoughts, exaggerated by his present circumstances.

In fact, his wife must certainly be asleep by this time, wasn't it so?

Wouldn't it actually be better to come home a little later? Shouldn't we try it? It was only a matter of passing an hour or two! As for the doubtful part being played by Miss Evelyn, that concerned his friends, not him. He *didn't even know why* this girl was slightly displeasing to him, physically speaking.

And after all, it was a day of national rejoicing that provided an excuse for any sort of difficulty to which a junket of this sort might possibly lead. And so forth, and so on.

He hesitated, nevertheless, for a few seconds. The very respectable air of Miss Evelyn decided him. So they would all go to supper together.

Once at table, it happened that Miss Evelyn, who had noted Anderson's somewhat withdrawn manner, set herself with the most carefully veiled deliberation to exercise her seductive arts. Her modest manners gave her presence such intoxicating charm that, at the sixth glass of champagne, the notion — oh, it was nothing but the merest spark of an ideal! but in short, the vague possibility of an escapade brushed across the mind of my friend Edward. It was simply (so he told me later) because of the *effort* involved, when he tried, by rousing his sensual imagination, to overcome an initial aversion to the general appearance of Miss Evelyn, by setting before himself the possible pleasure of possessing her — he was seduced, in short *by the aversion itself*.

And yet he was an honorable man: he adored his charming wife, and he rejected these impulses as being simply the products of carbonic acid fizzing in his brain.

The idea returned; temptation, redoubled by the circumstances and the hour, glittered before him and glanced invitingly at him!

He thought of going home; but already his desire had been roused in this futile struggle staged by conscience, and his mind seemed afire. A trifling joke on the austerity of his behavior was reason enough to remain.

Knowing little about nightlife, he only became aware somewhat later that one of his two friends had slipped under the table (apparently he found the carpet there more convenient than his distant bed), while the other, who had suddenly turned pale (as Miss Evelyn explained to him with a laugh), had deserted the party without explanation.

When the black doorman came to say that Anderson's cab was wait-



ing, Miss Evelyn gently invited herself along, asking, as was perfectly proper, if he would be kind enough to take her back to her house.

It's bound to seem harsh — unless one is an out-and-out blackguard — to behave severely toward a pretty girl, particularly when one has been joking with her for a couple of hours and she's played her role of congenial companion all that time.

Besides, it didn't mean a thing, he would leave her at her door, and that would be the end of it.

So they went together to her house.

The chilly air, the darkness, the silence of the streets all increased the whirl in Anderson's head; he felt a little sick and very sleepy. In short, he found himself (was it in a dream?) accepting a hot cup of tea from the white hands of Miss Evelyn Habal — now wearing a robe of pink satin, seated before a crackling fire in a warm room, perfumed and alluring.

How had all that come about? As soon as he became aware of himself, he seized his hat hastily and rose without asking any more questions. Seeing which, Miss Evelyn declared that, thinking him more indisposed than he really was, she had sent away the cab.

He said he would find another.

At these words Miss Evelyn lowered her head and turned pale; two discreet tears glistened on her lashes. Flattered in spite of himself, Anderson tried to soften the abruptness of his departure by "a few reasonable words."

That seemed to him more "gentlemanly."

After all, Miss Evelyn had taken care of him.

It grew later still; he took a banknote and placed it, as a farewell gesture, on the tea table. Miss Evelyn picked it up, not too ostentatiously, as if thinking of something else, then, with a shrug and a half smile threw it in the fire.

It was a gesture that disturbed the excellent manufacturer. By now he hardly knew where he was. The idea of not having behaved like a "gentleman" made him blush. He was distressed to think that he had grossly wounded his gracious hostess. Judge, if you will, his mental state from that thought. He remained indecisively by the door, hanging his head.

Then Miss Evelyn, still sullen, seized the key to the door, turned the lock with it, and flung it out the window.

At this point the serious, practical man was roused in Anderson; he grew angry.

But a sob, stifled in a little lacy pillow, mollified his anger.



What should he do? Break down the door? No, it would have been absurd. Any hubbub at this hour of the night was to be avoided. Wasn't it better after all to take heart and submit gracefully to one's *good* fortune?

Already his thoughts had taken an abnormal and quite extraordinary turn.

After all, when you thought about it, the infidelity of the adventure would be only very indefinite.

Besides, his retreat was cut off.

And then, WHO WOULD KNOW IT? No consequences were to be feared. And then, what a trifle! He would give her a diamond, and never see her again.

The big banquet earlier in the evening would explain many things... even supposing, even admitting that... Ah, no doubt he would have to make up some little lie, purely formal and venial, to satisfy Mrs. Anderson! (This necessity, as a matter of fact, rather annoyed him; this... But enough! He would think of it tomorrow.) Besides, tonight, it was already too late. And in any case, he swore on his honor that never again would the dawn find him in this room... and so on, and so forth.

He was at that point in his soliloquy when Miss Evelyn, coming toward him on tiptoe, threw her arms around his neck with delicious recklessness and remained hanging there, her eyelids shut, her lips seeking his. That sealed his doom.

We may hope, I daresay, that Anderson as a gallant and ardent cavalier knew how to enjoy to the full these hours of delight that Destiny had just imposed on him with such delicate violence.

Moral: A decent man without worldly wisdom makes a wretched husband. — A glass of sherry, if you please, Miss Hadaly?

## CHAPTER II

### Serious Sides of Light Adventures

*At the word "money" she gave a glance which passed like  
the flash of a cannon in the midst of its smoke.*

— Honoré de Balzac, *La Cousine Bette*

Lord Ewald expressed agreement with this last judgment and asked his friend to continue the story.

— Here is my opinion of escapades and follies of this nature, Edison declared. As he spoke, Hadaly silently poured new sherry into the glasses of her two guests, then once more withdrew.



—I really believe it's a rare occurrence when at least one of these frivolous adventures (to which one expects to devote no more than a couple of hours, a bit of remorse, and a hundred dollars or so) does not exercise a baneful influence on the rest of one's entire existence. But poor Anderson had fallen directly upon a woman who was deadly to him, though she must have seemed nothing but the most banal and insignificant of them all.

Anderson was wholly incapable of dissimulation. Everything was visible in his face, his expression, his attitude.

Mrs. Anderson, a courageous young person who had waited up for him all night (as wives traditionally do), simply looked at him when he came in for breakfast next morning; and that look told her everything. Her heart sank; her instinct had been confirmed. It was a cold and gloomy moment.

Having told the servants to withdraw, she asked him how he had been since the night before. Anderson told her with an uneasy smile that, having found himself a bit under the weather at the end of the banquet, he had gone to a friend's house where the celebration continued a while longer. To which Mrs. Anderson replied, pale as marble: "My friend, I don't intend to give your infidelity any more importance than its object deserves; I will only say your first lie had better be your last. You are better than your behavior, or so at least I hope; and your face at this moment is pretty good proof of the fact. Your children are quite well; they are sleeping in their room upstairs. To let them see and hear you this morning would be to humiliate you even further. All I ask of you, in exchange for my pardon, is that you don't ask me to extend it again."

So saying, Mrs. Anderson retired to her bedchamber, holding back her tears till she had closed the door behind her.

The truth, the insight, and the dignity of this reproach had as their chief effect the inflicting of a frightful wound on my friend Edward's self-esteem — a wound all the more dangerous because it struck at the sentiments of genuine love that he had for his noble wife. From that day forward, his hearth grew ever more chill. After several days, after a constrained and glacial reconciliation — he felt that he could see in his wife nothing more than "the mother of his children." Having nothing easier to hand, he returned to Miss Evelyn. Before long his domestic situation, for no better reason than that he felt himself guilty, became irksome . . . then disagreeable . . . and finally hateful and unbearable; that's the customary path by which these things develop. Then, in less than three years, Anderson managed to ruin, by a series of careless and irresponsible deficits, first his own fortune, then that of his family, and



finally that of various third parties who had seen fit to invest their money with him, till finally he stood on the verge of a scandalous and shameful bankruptcy.

At that point Miss Evelyn Habal abandoned him. Isn't it inconceivable? To tell you the truth, I still ask myself why. Up to that point, she had given every sign of really being in love with him.

Anderson had changed; he was no longer the man he had been, either physically or morally. His original weakness had spread across his nature like an oily streak. Even his courage seemed to have deserted him, along with his fortune, in the course of this affair — so that he was crushed by a desertion that, as he said, "nothing seemed to justify," especially during "the financial difficulties that he was experiencing." By a kind of misplaced shame, he ceased to keep up our old friendship; for I would certainly have made every effort to pull him out of this frightful quagmire into which he was slipping. He developed an extreme nervous irritability; he saw himself aging, disorganized, failing, and alone. At the last minute, the miserable man seemed to awake from his dream and — would you believe it? — in an access of frenzy and despair, put an end to his own life.

Here you must allow me to remind you, my lord, that before he encountered this deadly female, Anderson was of a nature as straightforward and finely tempered as the very best. I state the facts without passing judgment. I recall that during his lifetime, a trader who was his friend blamed him ironically for the probity of his conduct, called it incomprehensible, suggested that he was crazy — and then, in secret, went off to imitate him. Well, on with the story. What happens to us we often draw on ourselves, that's all.

Statistics in Europe and America will furnish us with a growing number of similar cases, rising into the tens of thousands every year — identical, or all but identical, with this one. In every city there are examples of young men, either students or workers, members of the idle rich, or excellent fathers of families, as people say, who have been given a little moral twist by a weakness of this sort, and who finish their careers in the same way, blindly and irrationally — for this sort of twist enslaves a man in exactly the same way that opium does.

Farewell family, children, wife; farewell dignity, duty, fortune, honor, country, and God! It is the effect of this corrosive contagion called passion to attack the meaning of these words within the brains of anyone who has been inoculated with it; and for such deserters to the cause of gallantry, life shortly reduces itself to a mere spasm. You observe, I take it, that our statistics concern only the men who actually *die* of this dis-



ease; that we take account only of those who committed suicide, were murdered, or were executed.

The rest swarm in the galleys or choke up the prisons; that's the common trash. The figure of which we speak (and it amounts to fifty-two or fifty-three thousand over the last few years alone) is growing so fast that we may expect it to double within the next few years — all the faster as provincial theaters open up in the smaller towns in order to raise the artistic standards of the growing populace.

The outcome of my friend Anderson's interest in choreography affected me, in any case, so deeply — struck me so much to the quick — that I became obsessed with the idea of analyzing precisely and in detail the nature of those seductions which had been able to disturb such a heart, such senses as his, such a conscience, and bring the man to such a wretched ending.

Never having had the pleasure of seeing with my own two eyes the dancer of my friend Edward, I undertook to guess in advance, and simply from the effect she had produced — by figuring the probabilities, by sheer guesswork, if you will — WHAT SHE MUST HAVE BEEN LIKE PHYSICALLY. Of course, my predictions might result in an aberration, as I think they say in astronomy. But I was curious to know if I could reckon right, departing as I thought from a half certainty. In a word, I proposed a work of pure calculation — out of motives similar to those of Leverrier, who always declined to set his eye to a telescope, yet who predicted almost to the minute the appearance of Neptune, and the exact spot in space where that planet would be found. His predictions were far more certain than all the telescopes in the world.

To me Miss Evelyn represented the X of an equation that could, after all, hardly have been more simple since I knew two terms of it: Anderson and his death.

Certain elegants among her friends had told me (and on their honor!) that this creature was unquestionably the prettiest and most voluptuous little kitten on the face of this earth for whom they had ever nourished a secret desire. Unfortunately (for you see how I am) I didn't recognize in them any authority to express, even in the most tentative form, the opinions that they put before me so positively. Having observed myself the destruction that knowledge of this girl had wrought in Anderson, I frankly mistrusted the round-eyed gaze of these enthusiasts. And so with the aid of a bit of dialectical analysis (that is, not forgetting the sort of man I had known Anderson to be before his disaster, and recalling the strange impressions he had left with me when he talked of his love), I began, let's say, to feel such a remarkable differ-



ence between what everyone told me of Miss Evelyn Habal and WHAT SHE MUST HAVE BEEN IN REALITY, that the crowd of her admirers and enthusiasts began to seem like a melancholy collection of hysterical ninnies. And this is why.

Unable to forget that Anderson's first impressions were of an "insignificant" woman, and that only intoxication had led him, for a few moments, to overcome an initial and instinctive aversion for her — and besides, that the imaginary personal charms that his fellow debauchees attributed *generally* to the chorus line (grace, charm, and irresistible and indescribable art of pleasing — all that sort of stuff), could only be such in terms of their own individual senses and tastes — I was led to think very doubtfully of her personal attractions. For though there's no absolute criterion of taste in the matter of sensuality, I couldn't in all logic fail to suspect the reality of charms capable of appealing IMMEDIATELY to the leprous tastes and debauched senses of these sordid and cold-hearted revelers. Thus the account they made of her seductive qualities, speaking to me *in confidence and ON FIRST ACQUAINTANCE*, simply indicated that her nature must be as sordid as theirs — in other words, that Miss Evelyn Habal must be, both physically and morally, of a particularly perverse *banality*. Besides, the minor question of her age (concerning which Anderson had always been evasive) seemed to be of a certain value in the matter; I made inquiries. The voluptuous little kitten was in fact only thirty-four.

As for the "beauty" of which she might boast — supposing always that the aesthetic plays any part at all in affairs at this level — I repeat, what sort of beauty could I expect to find in this woman, given the frightful degradation that prolonged possession of her had produced in a nature like that of Anderson?

### CHAPTER III

## The Shadow of the Upas Tree

*By their fruits ye shall know them.*

— The Evangelist

— Let us, I said to myself, light up the interior of this passion by directing onto it the luminous principle of the attraction of opposites; I'll bet the judgment of an official moralist against a penny that our estimate will be right.

The tastes and senses of my friend, as a single look at his face and



well-established standards would prove, could only be of the most simple, most natural, most primitive; I presumed therefore that they could only have been sterilized and corroded to the point of disaster through being *bewitched by their opposites*. Such an entity could have been *utterly* abolished only by the power of nothingness. Only the absolute void could have imposed on him this particular *manner* of vertigo.

However little rigor my method may have seemed to possess, therefore, it was absolutely *necessary* that, in spite of all the adoration with which she was surrounded, Miss Evelyn Habal should really be a person whose actual appearance would make people run away, howling with laughter or terror — even (if they had had eyes in their heads to look at her clearly and realistically just one time) those people who sang her praises so lavishly and loudly.

It simply *had to be* that they were all dupes of an illusion, pushed to extraordinary lengths, no doubt, but a simple illusion after all. In a word, all the various attractions of this curious creature had been *patched onto* the intrinsic paltriness of her individuality. That, then, was the ravishing deceit, beneath which this absolute nullity of any quality whatever was dissimulated, and this was the fraud that could deceive the first superficial glance of a passer-by. As for the more lasting illusion of Anderson, not only was it nothing unusual, it was actually inevitable.

Some of these females, in fact — I mean those who are degrading and fatal *only* for men of a special and particularly honorable nature — know instinctively how to accustom such a lover gradually to the various vacuities of their character, and how to do so with the utmost ingenuity. Naturally, casual acquaintances never have a chance to become aware of these flaws; but the serious and upright man they insidiously accustom, by a series of gradual and imperceptible blurrings of the vision, to a kind of sweetish half-light that gradually depraves his moral and physical retina. They have this secret talent for revealing each of their ugly failings with so much discretion that it passes for an advantage. And in the end they are slowly, insensibly, able to convert their reality (often frightful) into the original vision (often charming) they first presented. Custom prevails, lowering curtains over the sight; haze and darkness settle in; the illusion deepens — and bewitchment can no longer be prevented.

Such an operation seems to be evidence of a keen mind, a clever intelligence, does it not? But that's an illusion as great as the other.

These creatures understand nothing but this trick of theirs, they can do nothing else, they understand nothing else. They are strangers to everything else in the world: it doesn't interest them. It is a question



of pure animality. Take the bee, the beaver, or the ant, for example. They can do marvelous things, but they can only do that and will never be capable of anything else. Animals are exact; they are programmed at birth and for life. No mathematician could introduce a single extra cell into the hive of a swarm of bees, and the form of the hive is precisely that which contains the greatest number of cells in the smallest possible space. We could find many such examples. The animal is never deceived, never fumbles at his task. Man, on the other hand (and this is what constitutes his mysterious nobility, the hand of divinity upon him), is subject to development and to error. He is interested in all things and loses himself in them. He aims higher. He feels that he alone, in the entire universe, is not a finished product. He has the aspect of a forgotten god. By an impulse both natural and sublime, he asks himself *where he is*; he tries to reconstruct his own starting point. He examines his own intelligence, testing it against his doubts, as if after some immemorial fall that no one recalls exactly. Such is man in his reality. But the quality of beings who, though we list them among humanity, still cling to the instinctive world, is to be perfect on a single point, but *completely* limited to that one action.

Such are these "women," modern Furies of a sort, for whom the man they select is simply a victim to be weakened and degraded. By a kind of fatality, they obey blindly the obscure urgings of their malignant essence.

These creatures of man's second fall, these inciters of evil desires, these dispensers of forbidden pleasures, may pass unperceived through the arms of a thousand carefree lovers who take a passing fancy for them — pass and even leave an agreeable memory behind. *They are fatal only to the man who lingers over them to the exclusion of all others till his heart is contaminated with an abject need of their embraces.*

Wretched is the man who accustoms himself to the lulling of these sirens who destroy all sense of remorse! Their malice makes use of the most insidious, most paradoxical, most anti-intellectual devices of seduction in order to stupefy, little by little, a heart that had been pure and unstained till their evil power took command of it.

No doubt in every man there slumber ugly desires, rising from the fumes of flesh and blood, and terrible when unleashed. Certainly, since my friend Edward Anderson succumbed, the germs must have been in his heart, as in limbo; him I neither excuse nor judge! But I declare her guilty, above all, of a capital crime, that pestilent creature whose function it was to unleash knowingly, deliberately, the hundred-headed hydra within him! She was in no way comparable, I think to Eve, simple-minded Eve, whose love — it was fatal, no doubt, but still love — dragged



her toward the Temptation that she thought would raise her companion in Paradise to the station of a god. This was a deliberate assailant, avid with a secret and instinctive lust to drag down — almost *in spite of herself* — into the most sordid spheres of Instinct, into the most abject darkness of the spirit, the soul of a man from whom she wanted nothing except one day to be able to contemplate with idiot satisfaction his destruction, his despair, his death.

Yes, that's what these women are: trifling playthings for the passing gadabout, but deadly to men of more depth, whom they blind, befoul, and bind into slavery through the slow hysteria that distills from them. Thus, to accomplish their dark mission, which they can hardly avoid performing, *even in spite of themselves*, they lead their deluded lovers through ever-deepening clouds of folly, to a state of cerebral anemia and shameful ruin, or to the blockish suicide of Anderson.

All by themselves, they conceive of their project in its totality. At first they offer, like an insignificant apple, the taste of an *unknown* pleasure — already degrading, though! which a man agrees to accept only with a weak, uneasy smile, and, *even before the deed*, with a sense of remorse. How to steer clear of these alluring but detestable acquaintances who are, in case after case, *exactly the women that one shouldn't encounter!* Their pleas and feignings, so subtle and artificial that one senses the craftsman's instinct behind them, *almost* (Ah, I say *almost!* The whole thing is in that word for me!) oblige a man to sit down with them at this table where before long the demon of their evil nature constrains them, yes, them too, to furnish the man with nothing but poison. At that point, it's all over; the work is begun, and the malady will follow its course. Only a god can save him — and only by a miracle.

From such facts, duly analyzed, we may draw our conclusion in the following draconian edict:

These "neutral" women whose thought begins and finishes at the loins — and whose nature is therefore to focus ALL the thoughts of every man they meet on that spot, even though their bodies shelter nothing in the way of spirit but a mean and selfish calculation — these women, I say, are less remote in REALITY from the animal species than from our own. Hence the man worthy of his name has the rights of high and low justice over this species of female, by the same title that he claims these rights over other members of the animal kingdom.

If, then, one of these women, by fraudulent means and by taking advantage of one of those unlucky moments in which every living male, no matter how virile, finds himself defenseless, has been able to ensnare a worthy man, handsome, young, brave, devoted to duty, industrious,



intelligent, and hitherto irreproachable in his life — yes, I think this woman should not have the RIGHT to mislead such a man, willy-nilly, to the pit where that hellcat was able to lead my friend Anderson.

But as it is in the nature of these worthless yet deadly beings to abuse men, since their very existence is degrading and, worse, contagious, I conclude that it's the right of the man as against the woman (if, by some miracle, he is enabled to see what has been victimizing him) to inflict a summary execution on her, in the most secret and certain manner that he can, without the least scruple or form of legality, any more than one would hesitate about killing a vampire or a viper.

Consider the facts again; they are important. As a result of momentary mental confusion, due to the intoxication of that supper (a unique event, perhaps, in the life of this man), this vigilant vampire recognizes her possible prey, intuits his hidden, still-unawakened sensuality, weaves her web, catches him in it, leaps on him, ties him hand and foot, lies to him, and poisons him as her trade teaches; and at the same time also strikes at his wife, unblemished, responsible, and chaste, with her lovely children, waiting anxiously for her husband, now for the first time inexplicably late — you see, I repeat, that in a single night she corrodes with her potent poison the moral and physical health of this man and his family.

Suppose her to be questioned next day by a judge; she would reply blithely, "That at least, once he was awake, this man was perfectly free to protect himself by not coming to see me anymore." But she knows perfectly well — since as a result of her fearful instincts this is the only thing she does know — that *this man of all others* can escape her only by an effort far more violent than he anticipates, an effort that every relapse (and she will try to provoke them constantly) can only render more difficult.

And the judge will not know what to reply or what decision to render. Will this woman then have the *right* to press on her odious work, to drive her blind victim *helplessly* toward his destined precipice?

So be it, then. But just reflect how many thousands of women have been executed for less subtle assassinations. That is why, man having a duty to his fellow man, if my friend could not himself bring down justice on this "irresistible" purveyor of poison, I saw exactly what I had to do.

So-called modern spirits, that is to say tainted with the most skeptical of egoisms, will cry out when they hear me: "Oh, come now! What's the matter with him? Such fits of highflown morality — aren't they, to say the least, out of date? After all, these women are beautiful, they're



pretty; everybody knows they use these qualities to make their fortunes, which is nowadays the main aim in life — especially nowadays when our ‘social organizations’ don’t permit them many other ways to get ahead. And afterward? Well, why not? It’s the great struggle for existence, the great *Kill or be killed* of modern times. Every man for himself! Your friend was nothing but a simpleton after all, guilty on any account of a *shameful* weakness and of sensuality amounting almost to madness; no doubt, he was also a boring and tiresome ‘protector’ as well. My word, let him rest in peace!”

Well and good. It goes without saying that these statements seem rational only because they consist of vague, imprecise clichés; indeed, they aren’t much different, in my judgment, so far as their bearing on our question is concerned, from these: “Is it raining?” or “What time is it?” And though they don’t realize it, such statements reveal in the speakers a condition of moral servitude very much like that of Anderson.

“These women are *beautiful*!” they say?

Come, now! BEAUTY is a matter that concerns Art and the human soul. Those loose women of our time who do in fact have a certain superficial beauty do not, it will be noted, produce their malign effects *on men of the sort I’ve described*; they have no reason to stoop to temptations that they would consider unattractive in the first place. They never inflict so much pain, and they are infinitely less dangerous, because their lie is never complete. The greater number are even possessed of a certain simplicity that makes them capable of a few elevated sensations, even of an occasional devotion! *But those who can degrade a man like Anderson to such vileness and such a death cannot be beautiful in any acceptable sense of the word.*

If there are some who *seem* beautiful at first glance, I declare that their faces or bodies *must*, inevitably, contain some traces of abject infamy which deny the rest and affirm their real nature. Their lives of excess soon reinforce these deformities. And in fact, *given the kind of passion they arouse, and the consequences to which it leads*, it’s plain their power over the lover comes in no way from their illusory beauty *but, rather, directly from those hateful traits* which make the lover merely *tolerate* the bit of conventional beauty they do possess, and disgrace. A casual passer-by may desire these women for their bit of beauty — the lover, never! And yet our idle commentators say, “These women are *pretty*!”

Even granting that the word means different things to different people, nobody knows at what price these women are pretty, after they have made their first three steps in life past childhood. And I maintain the price has some bearing on the matter, this time.



For the *prettiness* of their persons is quick to become *artificial* and in time VERY ARTIFICIAL. No doubt it's difficult to recognize at a glance; but *the fact remains*. "What matter (our philosophers will cry out) if the whole thing makes an agreeable impression? Are they anything, for us, but fleeting moments of pleasure? If the enjoyment of their persons is not disagreeable to us when spiced up with artificial aids and supplements, what matter how they prepare the synthetic diet on which they feed us?"

I think I can show you shortly that it matters a good deal more than these careless amateurs suppose. In any case, if we look these dubious adolescents in the eye (ah yes, *pretty* they are, no doubt), we'll surely see in those eyes the glare of the obscene cat who sleeps within them, and that sight will spoil on the spot whatever charm they may have *borrowed* from their contrived and artificial youth.

If, begging pardon for the sacrilege, we place alongside them one of those simple young girls who still blush rosy red at the first sacred words of young love, we'll see at once that the word "pretty" is a little generous when applied to that banal assemblage of powder, rouge, false teeth, false complexions, false hair whether red, blond, or brunette — not to speak of the false smiles, false glances, and false pretences of "love."

So it's not right to say of these women that they're pretty or ugly, beautiful or young or blonde or old or brunette or fat or thin — since even if it was possible to know it, and affirm it before they had suddenly changed to some other appearance, even so, *the secret of their malignant charm is not there*. Quite the contrary!

Though it baffles the mind to conceive it, the axiom that summarizes these female *witches* in their relation to man is that *their morbid and fatal influence on their victim is in direct ratio to the quantity of moral and physical artifice with which they reinforce — or, rather, overwhelm — the very few natural seductive powers they seem to possess*.

In a word, whether they are pretty, or beautiful, or ugly, or anything else, it *isn't for that reason* that *their* lover (the one who is going to succumb before them) grows attached to them and blinds himself! *These personal characteristics have nothing whatever to do with it*. This is the single point I wanted to make, because it's the most important.

I pass, among the people of this world, for an inventive and imaginative fellow; but, let me assure you, my imagination, even heightened by my avowed hatred for Miss Evelyn Habal, could never — no, never, never — have conceived to what a fantastic and unthinkable degree this axiom would be confirmed by... what we are about to see, hear, and touch this very minute.



Now a concluding comparison, before we come to the demonstration.

All beings have their *correspondences* in the lower orders of nature. Such a correspondence, which is, as it were, the figure of the superior being, clarifies its nature in the eyes of the metaphysician. To recognize it, one need only consider the results produced by these creatures on those who come near them. Well, in the world of vegetables (where we must look to find a correspondent being, since these deadly Circes, in spite of their human forms, are essentially creatures of the animal world), their correspondent form is the upas tree, of which they are, by analogy, simply so many poisonous leaves.

One sees it first, gilded by the sun and glittering. Its shade, as you know, benumbs the senses, fills the mind with feverish hallucinations, and, if one lingers under its influence, becomes fatal.

Thus the beauty of the tree must be *borrowed* and *adventitious* to its real nature.

And, in fact, if you strip the upas of its millions of caterpillars, which are brilliant and poisonous, it will be nothing but a dead tree with dirty pinkish flowers, from which the sun can no longer strike a glint. Its very power to harm disappears if one transplants it away from its native habitat — it promptly perishes, disdained by one and all.

The caterpillars are necessary to it; it *appropriates* them to itself. They attract one another, the tree and its innumerable caterpillars, because of the deadly action they can accomplish together, which *calls them forth* to a synthetic unity. Such is the upas tree, the manchineel tree if you will; certain varieties of love cast the same sort of shade.

And when one strips from these women whose allure is so deadly their corrupting artificial attractions — like so many caterpillars — there remains of most of them what remains of the upas tree under the same circumstances.

Replace the sun with the imagination of the man who looks on them, and the illusion, precisely because of the secret effort it requires, appears all the more sparkling and attractive. Look at these women with a cold eye for *what produces* the illusion, and it will dissipate in thin air, leaving a sense of invincible disgust, deadly to the slightest stirring of desire.

Miss Evelyn Habal thus became for me the subject of a curious experiment. I determined to discover her, not to prove my theory, which has been true for all eternity, but in order to state it under conditions as *complete* and *beautiful* as they could possibly be.

— Miss Evelyn Habal! I said to myself. I wonder what THAT could possibly be?



I set out to track her down.

The delicious child was in Philadelphia, where the ruin and death of Anderson had made for her a splendid reputation; she was much sought after. I went there and made her acquaintance in a few hours. She was quite ill; a disease was preying upon her — upon her physical constitution, of course. So that, in fact, she only survived for a short time after her dear Edward.

Yes, Death took her from us several years ago.

Still, I had enough time before she died to verify in her my presentiments and theories. After all, you understand, her death mattered very little; I can make her come into our presence as if nothing had ever happened to her.

The enticing little ballerina is going to favor us with a dance, accompanying herself with a song, a performance on the tambourine and castanets.

With these last words, Edison rose and pulled at a cord that hung from the ceiling beside a tapestry.

#### CHAPTER IV

### Danse Macabre

*And it's hard work being a beautiful woman!*

— Charles Baudelaire

A long strip of transparent plastic encrusted with bits of tinted glass moved laterally along two steel tracks before the luminous cone of the astral lamp. Drawn by a clockwork mechanism at one of its ends, this strip began to glide swiftly between the lens and the disk of a powerful reflector. Suddenly on the wide white screen within its frame of ebony topped by a gold rose flashed the life-size figure of a very pretty and quite youthful redhead.

The transparent vision, miraculously caught in color photochrome, wore a spangled costume as she danced a popular Mexican dance. Her movements were as lively as those of Life itself, thanks to the procedures of successive photography, which can record on its microscopic glasses ten minutes of action to be projected on the screen by a powerful lampascope, using no more than a few feet of film.

Edison touched a groove in the black frame and lit a little electric light in the center of the gold rose.

Suddenly a voice, rather flat and stiff, a hard, dull voice, was heard; the dancer was singing the *alza* and *olé* of her fandango. The



tambourine began to rattle and the castanets to click.

The gestures, glances, and lip movements were reproduced; so were the wriggings of the hips, the winking of the eyes, the thin suggestion of a smile.

Lord Ewald stared on this vision in silent surprise.

— Well now, my lord, cried Edison, isn't this a ravishing little girl? Just look at that! All things considered, the passion of my friend Edward Anderson was not inconceivable. What hips! What beautiful red hair; really, it's like burnt gold! And that complexion, so pale and yet so warm! Note the curious long eyes! And those little rosy fingernails where the dawn seems to have wept tears of dew, they glitter so brilliantly. And those delicate blue veins, do you see how they glow in the excitement of the dance? The youthful freshness of arms and neck, do you see it? Her pearly smile, her rich red mouth? Those elegant brows of arched gold? Her finely etched nostrils, nervous as the wings of a butterfly? That breast, so firm and full, which seems to be straining under its satin? Those delicate legs, so beautifully modeled? Those delicate feet, so finely arched? — Ah, Edison concluded with a long sigh, Nature is very beautiful after all! And this particular creature is certainly a morsel fit for a king, as the poets say.

The electrician seemed lost in a romantic reverie. You would have thought he was waxing sentimental over the girl himself.

— You're quite right, said Lord Ewald; make fun of Nature if you choose, but even though it's true that this pretty young creature dances better than she sings, still, I suppose, if sensual pleasure was what attracted your friend, this young lady must have appeared to him extremely desirable.

— Ah? said Edison, still dreamy, but with a strange accent. He looked at Lord Ewald.

He turned to the tapestry and adjusted a collar on the cord controlling the lamp. The first filmstrip leaped from its track; the image disappeared from the screen. A second heliochromic band quickly replaced the first and began running as quick as light before the reflector. On the screen appeared a little bloodless creature, vaguely female of gender, with dwarfish limbs, hollow cheeks, toothless jaws with practically no lips, an almost bald skull, with dim and squinting eyes, flabby lids, and wrinkled features, all dark and skinny.

And the whining voice sang an obscene song, and the whole creature continued to dance just like the previous image, with the same tambourine and the same castanets.

— Well, said Edison, smiling, what do you think?



— Who or what is that little witch? Lord Ewald asked.

— Why, Edison replied placidly, it's the same person; simply, *this is the true one*. It is the person who was hiding beneath the appearance of the other. I see you've never really taken a serious accounting of the improvements in the art of makeup during these modern times, my lord!

Then, resuming his enthusiastic tone, he cried aloud:

— *Ecce puella!* Here is the radiant Evelyn Habal, stripped like a tree of its caterpillars, of all her alluring devices! Isn't she enough to make one die of desire? Ah, the poor lovelorn child! How lively she is in our picture! The dream of love fulfilled! What profound passions, what ardent love she could inspire! Isn't it beautiful when we can gaze on Nature pure and simple? Can we ever hope to rival this Nature? I'm bound to give up and hang my head — don't you agree? Or do you think it was just by the power of Suggestion that I obtained these last poses? Ridiculous! Don't you think that if Anderson had seen her this way at first, he would still be by his fireside with his wife and his children — and that this would have been better for him in the end? What is this craft called "makeup"? Women have fairy fingers, it's clear! And once the original impression is produced, I tell you, the Illusion clings forever, and even feeds on the most odious of faults. And finally, it fastens itself with fingernails like those of a demented chimera, even on the most hideous of all women.

A really sly puss need only know the art of confessing her faults to make of them an effective screen, and use it to inspire passion in the unpracticed men whom she has imperceptibly blinded. It's nothing other than a matter of vocabulary: the skinny girl becomes delicate, the ugly one is lively, the dirty one casual, the liar is clever, and so forth and so on. And, a single imperceptible step at a time, one reaches the stage where this little girl's lover arrived at a shameful death. Read the thousands of newspapers that every day and in every land repeat the same story and you will see that, far from inflating my figures, I am understating them.

— Do I have it on your word, my dear Edison, asked Lord Ewald in an undertone, that these two visions are of one and the same woman?

At this question, Edison once more looked into the face of his young friend, but this time with an expression of grave melancholy.

— Ah, you really have rooted the Ideal deep in your heart! he cried at last. Well, since that's how it is, I must really convince you this time! And, in fact, you force me to it. Look, my lord; here is the real reason why that poor Edward Anderson destroyed his dignity, his body, his honor, his fortune, and his life.



And he drew from the wall, under the luminous image that continued its sinister dance, a deep drawer:

— Here, he went on, here are the spoils of this charmer, here are the devices of this seductive creature! Will you be kind enough to provide us with a bit of light, Miss Hadaly?

The Android rose, picked up a perfumed torch, and, after lighting it at the blossom of a flower, took Lord Ewald by the hand and drew him gently toward Edison.

— Indeed, the engineer continued, if you thought at your first view of Miss Evelyn Habal that her charms were *natural*, I fear you are going to have to revise that impression. For as a person whose appearance was defective she was, I might say, a paragon, a model, a prodigy, a nonpareil, the supreme type of which other women, God be thanked, can only be pallid copies! See here now.

At this word, Hadaly raised her torch over her veiled head to illuminate the dark drawer, standing beside it like a statue at the side of a tomb.

## CHAPTER V

### Exhumation

*Weep, o ye Venuses and Cupids!*

— Catullus

— Now see here, Edison blared through his nose with the accents of an auctioneer. Here we have the girdle of Venus, the scarf of the Graces, the very arrows of Cupid himself.

First of all, the tresses of Salome, the glittering fluid of the stars, the brilliance of sunlight on autumn foliage, the magic of forest noontides, a vision of Eve the blonde, our youthful ancestress, forever radiant! Ah! To revel in these tresses! What a delight, eh?

And he shook in the air a horrible mare's nest of matted hair and faded ribbons, streaked here and there where the coloring had worn away, mottled and tangled, a dirty rainbow of wig work, corroded and yellowed by the action of various acids.

— Here now is the lily complexion, the rosy modesty of the virgin; here is the seductive power of passionate lips, moist and warm with desire, all eager with love!

And he set forth a makeup box filled with half-empty jars of rouge, pots of greasepaint, creams and pastes of every sort, patches, mascara, and so forth.



— Here we have the calm magnificence of the expression, the pure arc of the brows, the deep shadows of passion, eloquent of sleepless nights! We have also here the delicate veins of the temples and the rose colors of the features, suffused with sudden joy at the sound of the young lover's footsteps!

And he pulled forth various hairpins blackened with rust, blue pencils, lipstick brushes, lacquers of China white, eyebrow pencils, boxes of Smyrna kohl, and so forth.

— Here are the gleaming white teeth, so girlish, so glittering and fresh! Ah, the first kiss on those provocative lips, which displayed them behind a dazzling smile!

And he played, like a pair of castanets, with the upper and lower dentures of a set such as one sees on display outside a dentist's office.

— Here is the glitter, the sheen, the pearly glow of the neck, the youthful softness of shoulders and arms; here is the alabaster gleam of the lovely undulant throat!

And he held up, one after another, the different implements of complexion creation — sinister lotions, powders, creams, and so forth.

— Here now are the lovely breasts of our siren, from the salt sea waves of morning! From the foam of ocean and the rays of the sun, here are the ethereal contours of the heavenly court of Venus!

And he waved aloft some scraps of gray wadding, bulging, grubby, and giving off a particularly rancid odor.

— Here are the thighs of the wood nymph, the delirious bacchante, the modern girl of perfect beauty, more lovely than the statues of Athens, the one who dances with such divine madness!

And he brandished aloft various old girdles, falsies, and apparatus of steel and whalebone, busks of orthopedic function, and the remains of two or three ancient corsets so complicated, what with their laces and buttons, that they looked like old dismantled mandolins, with their strings whipping at random around them.

— Here are the dainty, the exquisitely formed legs of the ballerina!

And he waved aloft, while holding them as far from himself as possible, two heavy, smelly stockings, once of a rosy color, but now most notable for the wads of stuffing they contained.

— Here is all the brilliance of the nails, both toe and finger, the glitter of those delicate little hands! Ah, the Orient! surely that must be the source of these luminous colors!

And he showed the little bottles of polish and their brushes still stiff and dirty with different shades of coagulated lacquer.

— Here is the elegant step, the arch, the dainty poise of a femi-



nine foot, where nothing betrays the presence of a servile, a base, or a greedy race.

And he knocked against one another a pair of high-heeled shoes, with soles constructed to conceal the real dimensions of the foot, and bits of cork built in to give the appearance of an arch.

— Here is the BASIS of the smile, whether naive, mischievous, cajoling, lofty, or sad, the real machinery of those enchanting expressions and “irresistible” glances for which the lady was famous.

And he displayed an enlarging mirror in which the dancer had studied, down to the last line, the “values” of her physiognomy.

— Here now we have the healthful aroma of Youth and Life, the personal aroma of this animated flower!

And he brought forth vials of synthetic perfumes, products of the chemical industry, devised to counter the regrettable emanations of nature; and he placed them among the rouge pots and eyebrow pencils as carefully as if they were exotic specimens.

— Here now are some more serious bottles, though produced by the same factory; their scent, their color of iodide, and their mutilated labels give us reason to suspect what sort of *forget-me-not* the poor child could offer to her chosen admirers.

Here are some other ingredients and objects, oddly shaped to say the least; out of deference to our dear Hadaly, we had better say nothing of their possible use, don't you agree? They suggest, however, that this native creature had a certain skill in the craft of rousing men to innocent transports of excitement.

And, to conclude, said Edison, here are certain herbs and specimens from the shops of the chemist and the herb seller; their special virtues are well known, and they indicate that Miss Evelyn Habal, in her modesty, did not feel herself destined for the joys of family life.

Having thus terminated his catalogue, the sinister engineer threw everything back in the drawer pell-mell, and then, having reburied what he had exhumed, he dropped the lid on it like a tombstone, and shoved the drawer back into the wall.

— I trust, my lord, he concluded, that you are now edified. I do not believe, I refuse to believe, that there ever existed among the most bedaubed and bepraised of our light ladies any one more . . . recommended . . . than Miss Evelyn; but what I swear, what I can witness, is that *all are, or will be tomorrow (with the help of a little artifice), more or less of her family.*

And he turned to a pitcher nearby to wash and then dry his fingers.

Lord Ewald remained silent, deeply surprised, profoundly depressed, and lost in thought.



He watched Hadaly as she silently extinguished her torch in the earth of a tub holding an artificial orange tree.

Edison returned.

— I understand, he said, how under certain circumstances one might kneel before a grave or a tomb; but before this drawer, before these relics! . . . It's hard to conceive of, isn't it? And yet aren't these in fact *her true remains*?

He pulled once more at the cord controlling the projector. The vision disappeared, the singer fell silent; the funeral oration had concluded.

— We're far removed here from Daphnis and Chloe, said he.

And then, as if providing a tranquil summary:

— Well, he said, was it really worthwhile to become a crook, to deprive one's family of everything, to forget all one's hopes and dreams, and to fling oneself blindly into the pit of a disgraceful suicide, for no better reason than this, *the contents of this drawer*?

Ah! people who are too confident of their facts! What poets they are, when they themselves begin to think about taking a flight in the clouds! And to think that fifty-two or fifty-three thousand such cases (many perhaps less monstrous than this one, but just about identical in kind if they were investigated thoroughly) occur every year in England and America. And most of those who fall victim to the moral horror of these "irresistible" executioners are people endowed with the strongest instincts of practical common sense; they are the most "realistic" of men, and the most disdainful of those unworldly dreamers who, from the far reach of their chosen solitude, look sorrowfully on.

## CHAPTER VI

### Honni Soit Qui Mal Y Pense

*Thus, darting afar their glances of rage,  
Each sex will decline on its separate stage.*

— Alfred de Vigny, *Destinies*

— Well then, Edison continued, when I had assembled these proofs that my unhappy friend had never held in his arms anything but a sad phantom, and that underneath all her paraphernalia the hybrid creature of his passion was as false as his love itself — to the point, in fact, of being nothing but *the Artificial giving an illusion of life* — I drew, as I was bound to, just one conclusion:

Since in Europe and America thousands of reasonable men every year



leave their wives and allow themselves to be destroyed in thousands of episodes *almost* identical with this one . . .

— Oh, come now! interrupted Lord Ewald, you must admit that your friend encountered the most unbelievable exception in the world, and that the wretched outcome of his love affair can be excused or understood only as the effect of clinical madness calling for medical treatment. So many other female vampires are truly seductive in their charms that trying to make a general rule on the basis of this single incident would be a gross paradox.

— I said something like that myself, replied Edison. Still, perhaps you forget that you yourself found perfectly natural the first appearance of Evelyn Habal; and without insisting further on the way our elegant ladies have brought chemical laboratories into their boudoirs (where a proverb tells us that neither husband or lover should ever venture), I will tell you that the moral hideousness of women who produce such disasters more than compensates for the little they have that is not physically repulsive. Stripped as they are even of the feelings that animals possess, and courageous as they are only to destroy or bestialize, I prefer not to say what I think of the malady they spread, which some people choose to call love. Indeed, part of the whole evil comes from the fact that some mealy-mouthed people make use of this word “love” in place of the *real* one.

Well then, I thought, if the Artificial, when assimilated to or even amalgamated with human nature, can produce such catastrophes; and since, consequently, any woman of the destructive sort is more or less an Android, either morally or physically — in that case, one artifice for another, why not have the Android herself? In this sort of passion it's always impossible to escape from a strictly personal illusion, and since *all* these women are more or less artificial, since it is Woman herself who suggests the notion of being replaced by the Artificial, let's spare her the trouble, if that may be. These women want us to weep salt tears if their whims or their crimes decree that we must be separated from their rouge pots? Let's try to change their lie for another. That way will be easier for them and for us. In a word, if the creation of an electro-human being, capable of working a change for the better in the spirit of mortal man, can be reduced to a formula, let us try to obtain from Science an equation for Love. To say no more, *it will not have the evil effects we've shown to be inevitable in the human race as it now exists*; essentially, it's a matter of fighting fire with fire.

Once the formula is found and diffused throughout the world, it may well save within a few years thousands and thousands of lives.



And nobody will be able to raise impudent objections against me, *since it's the normal action of the Android to neutralize within a few hours any low and degrading desires for the original model that may exist in the most inflamed of hearts; and this is accomplished by saturating it with a profound awe hitherto unknown, the irresistible effect of which I do not think anyone can possibly imagine who has not experienced it.*

Accordingly, I went to work; I struggled with the problem, one concept at a time. In the end — aided by a sort of *clairvoyant* named Sowana, about whom I'll tell you later — I discovered the formula of which I had dreamed; and out of it, in a single creative burst, I raised from a shadow Hadaly.

## CHAPTER VII

### Dazzlement

*Rational philosophy weighs the possibilities and declares:  
"There's no way to disintegrate light."*

*Experimental philosophy listens and remains silent  
through the centuries; then suddenly she displays the prism  
and says: "Light is disintegrated."*

— Diderot

— Since she has been standing alone in these hidden caverns, I have been looking for a man sure enough of his own intelligence, and desperate enough, to undertake the first experiment; and it is you who are going to complete this work, you who have come — you who, possessing perhaps the most beautiful woman on earth, are sickened by her to the point of wanting to die.

Having thus brought his fantastic tale to a close, the electrician turned toward Lord Ewald and indicated the silent Android who stood beside them, holding her two hands against her veil as if to conceal her still-invisible features.

— Now, said Edison, do you still want to know *how* this vision of the future is going to be realized? Are you certain that your deliberate illusion will be strong enough to withstand this explanation?

After a silence, Lord Ewald said simply: Yes.

Then, with a glance at Hadaly:

— One would think she was suffering, he said, as if considering with a kind of grave curiosity this fantastic and yet somehow very real anomaly that stood before him.



— Not a bit of it, said Edison. She has taken the attitude of a child about to be born — she is hiding her face before life.

There was a moment of silence.

Come, Hadaly, he cried abruptly.

At these words, the Android stepped forward, veiled and shadowy, toward the porphyry table.

The young man looked at the electrician: already bent over his glittering surgeon's case, Edison was choosing from among his crystal scalpels.

Having reached the edge of the table, Hadaly turned around and spoke graciously, locking her hands behind her head:

— My lord, she said, preserve, if you will, a little indulgence for my humble unreality, and before you despise the thought of it, *recall for a moment the human society that obliges you to have recourse to a mere phantom in order to recapture Love.*

As she finished speaking, a sort of electric spark ran across the flexible armor of Hadaly; Edison captured it with the aid of a wire held between two long pincers of crystal, making it disappear.

It was as if the soul of this human form had been carried off.

The table tilted up; the Android now stood with her back to it, her head resting against the cushion.

The electrician stooped and loosened two steel clamps riveted to the floor, slid them beneath the feet of Hadaly, and then moved the table back to its horizontal position, with the Android now lying on it like a corpse on the dissecting table in an amphitheater.

— Think of the picture of Andreas Vesalius, said Edison with a smile. Though we're alone down here, we're imitating the general idea of it at this moment.

He touched one of the rings of Hadaly. The feminine outer integument slowly drew open.

Lord Ewald shuddered and grew very pale.

Until that point doubts had still lingered in his mind.

In spite of everything his learned guide had said, he had found it impossible to admit that the Being that had given him, up to now, the illusion of a living woman enclosed in a suit of armor was in fact a fictive being created by Science, patience, and genius.

Now he found himself face to face with a marvel the obvious possibilities of which, as they transcended even the imaginary, dazzled his understanding and made him suddenly feel to what lengths a man who wishes can extend the courage of his desires.



## BOOK V

## HADALY

## CHAPTER I

## First Appearance of the Machine in Humanity

*When one solitary meets another in a remote spot, they  
won't be thought to be reciting the Lord's Prayer.*

— Tertullian

Edison untied the black veil at the beltline.

— The Android, he said inexpressively, is divided into four major parts:

1. The living system of the interior, consisting of equilibrium, walking, talking, gestures, senses, the expressions of the face which is still to come, and the inward regulator of movements, or, to put it more simply, "the Soul."

2. The armature, that is to say, the metallic envelope that isolates the epidermis and the flesh; this is a sort of armor with flexible articulations, within which the interior system is solidly fastened.

3. The flesh (or artificial flesh, to call it by its proper name), placed over the armature and adhering to it. When penetrated by the animating fluid, it forms the traits and contours of the imitated body, with the particular and personal emanation of the body to be reproduced, the hollows and swellings of the bony structure and the musculature, the system of veins and arteries, the sexuality of the model, all the proportions of the body, and so forth.

4. The epidermis, or human skin, which includes and consists of the coloring, the porosity, the features, the special glitter of the smile, the delicate marks of expression, the exact lip movements of speech, the hair and the entire system of down, the eye assembly, with the associated individuality of the glance, not to speak of the teeth and mouth systems and those of the nails.

Edison delivered this lecture in the monotonous tone of one setting forth a geometrical theory the QED of which is practically contained in the first proposition. From his tone of voice Lord Ewald gathered not only that the engineer was going to resolve all the problems raised by this monstrous set of affirmations, but that he had already resolved



them, and was simply concerned to set forth the proof of established facts.

That was why the English lord, stirred beyond expression by the terrible assurance of the scientist, felt the icy chill of Science at his heart during this extraordinary explanation. Nevertheless, playing the man of the world, he spoke not a word of interruption.

Edison's voice had become singularly grave and melancholic.

— My lord, he said, at least I have no surprises to set before you. What would be the point? Reality, as you are about to see, is surprising enough in itself without any special tricks of mine. You are about to witness the birth of an ideal being, since you will be present at an illustrated explanation of the inner workings of Hadaly. Can you imagine a Juliet submitting to such an examination without causing Romeo to faint?

Actually, if one could form a sort of retrospective moving picture of the woman one loves in her very first physical manifestations, and *what she was like when she made her very first movements*, I imagine most lovers would feel their passion melt away into a sentiment where the Lugubrious would fight it out with the Absurd and the Inconceivable.

But the Android, even in her first beginnings, offers none of the disagreeable impressions that one gets from watching the *vital processes* of our own organism. In her, everything is rich, ingenious, mysterious. Look here.

And he applied his scalpel to the central apparatus fastened at the level of the cervical vertebrae of the Android.

— This is the point at which the life of man has its focus, he said, continuing his lecture. It's the place in the spinal column from which springs the marvelous tree of the nervous system. Touch this point with a needle, and (as you realize) our life will be snuffed out on the spot. This is the root of our entire nervous system, on which, for example, our continued breathing depends; so that, if one touches it ever so delicately, we die of suffocation. You see that in this matter I have respected the example set by Nature; these two inductors, isolated at this very point, control the activity of the golden lungs of the Android.

Let us first take, as it were, a bird's-eye view of the organism in its entirety; I'll explain its detailed workings a little later.

It is by means of an intricate code recorded on these metal discs and automatically read off them, that warmth, motion, and energy are diffused through the body of Hadaly, through an interlaced network of complex wires, exact imitations of our nerves, arteries, and veins. It is by means of these little discs of tempered glass (their operation is quite



simple, and I'll explain it to you in a moment) that the current distributed throughout the electrical network is modulated, so that motion can be communicated or inhibited in any one of the limbs or in the entire person. This is the basic electromagnetic motor, which I have miniaturized while at the same time multiplying its power; *all* the various inductors of the mechanisms are connected with it.

This particular electric spark, on loan from Prometheus, has been trained to circle this rod, a type of magic wand, and thereby to produce respiration, by acting on this magnet, placed vertically between the two breasts where it attracts this nickel strip leading to a stainless steel sponge, which moves and then returns to its original position under the regular influence of the isolator here. I have even thought of those profound sighs that sorrow draws from the depths of the heart; Hadaly, being of a gentle and taciturn disposition, is no stranger to them or to their special charm. There is no woman who does not know how easy it is to imitate these melancholy sighs. Actresses can produce them by the dozen — each warranted of the highest possible quality — to produce their proper illusion in us.

Here are the two golden phonographs, placed at an angle toward the center of the breast; they are the lungs of Hadaly. They exchange between one another tapes of those harmonious — or I should say, *celestial* — conversations: the process is rather like that by which printing presses pass from one roller to another the sheets to be printed. A single tape may contain up to seven hours of language. The words are those of the greatest poets, the most subtle metaphysicians, the most profound novelists of this century — geniuses to whom I applied, and who granted me, at extravagant cost, these hitherto-unpublished marvels of their thought.

This is why I say that Hadaly replaces *an* intelligence with Intelligence itself.

You see, here are the two almost imperceptible needles of pure steel, trembling within their grooves, which turn perpetually beneath them, thanks to the subtle, unceasing energy of that mysterious electric current: they wait for nothing but the actual voice of Miss Alicia Clary, I assure you. They will capture it from a distance without her knowing what is happening; she will be repeating, like a dutiful actress, scenes that she herself cannot possibly understand — the marvelous and unknown roles in which Hadaly will become incarnate forever.

Below the lungs, you see here the Cylinder on which will be inscribed, in relief, the gestures, the bearing, the facial expressions, and



the attitudes of the adored being. It is the exact analogy of those so-called Barbary barrel organs, on the cylinders of which are encrusted, as they are on this, a thousand little metallic points. Now, these particular cylinders, engraved according to musical calculation, play with precision the Notes (whether in semibreves, quavers, or rests) of a dozen different dance airs and operas, depending on how they are placed in the closely knit rows beneath the vibrating teeth of the harmonic comb. So, in exactly the same way here; the Cylinder, beneath a similar comb that picks up the extremities of the vibrating teeth of the harmonic comb. So, in exactly the same way here; the Cylinder, beneath a similar comb that picks up the extremities of all the inductive nerves of the Android, *plays* (and I can tell you exactly how) *all the gestures, the bearing, the facial expressions, and the attitudes of the woman that one incarnates in the Android*. The inductors of this Cylinder are, so to speak, the great sympathetic nervous center of our marvelous phantom.

To be more precise, this Cylinder is programmed to make possible some seventy different movements of a general character. It is approximately the same number that any well-bred woman can and should command. Our movements, apart from those of a few spastics and convulsionaries, are almost always the same: the different situations of life give them different overtones and make them seem different entirely. But I've calculated, by breaking them down into their fundamental components, that twenty-seven or twenty-eight different movements at the most suffice to compound an unusually rich personality. Besides, what is a woman who gesticulates too much? An unbearable creature. Accordingly, you will find here none but harmonious and graceful movements, the others being either shocking or useless.

Now the two lungs and the sympathetic nervous center of Hadaly are linked together by a single unique movement whose fluid is the impulsion. Some twenty hours of recorded conversation, suggestive and captivating, are inscribed on this album of leaves; thanks to the technique of galvanoplastics, they cannot be erased. Their expressive *Correspondences* are likewise inscribed on the points of her Cylinder, micrometrically inlaid. It follows accordingly, does it not, that the action of the two phonographs, combined with that of the Cylinder, produce a synchronizing of words and gestures as well as of the movement of the lips. And so it is also with the glances of the eyes and the most subtle expressions of the features.

You understand that the ensemble of these different programs is regulated in every scene with split-second precision. No question but that



it's much harder, mechanically speaking, than to record a melody with its accompaniments and complex harmonies on a single organ cylinder; but our instruments, as I've told you, have become so subtle and exact nowadays (especially with the help of our fixed lenses) that with a little patience and differential calculus one can work out the whole procedure without too much difficulty.

By now I can *read* the gestures recorded on this Cylinder as fluently as a printer's devil can read off, in reverse, a page of type in a form; it's simply a question of habit. And so I will correct this first proof of mine to accord with the various physical habits of Miss Alicia Clary; capturing them is by no means difficult, as a result of the successive photography of which you've just had a demonstration.

— But, Lord Ewald interrupted, a scene such as you describe supposes an interlocutor, doesn't it?

— Well, then, said Edison, won't you yourself be that interlocutor?

— How will it be possible to foresee what I will ask the Android, or say in answer to her?

— Oh, that! said Edison. A short process of reasoning will convince you that the problem is very simple — though I don't think, in fact, that you've stated it quite accurately.

— Just a moment: whatever the problem may be, it's my personal freedom, in my thought as in my affections, that will be taken away from me, if I submit my spirit to its domination! cried Lord Ewald.

— What matter, if it ensures the REALITY of your dream? said Edison. And who is really free? The angels of the old legend, perhaps! Perhaps, indeed, they are the only ones who can be said to have earned the title of Free! For they are delivered from Temptation... having seen the abyss into which those angels fell who undertook to think for themselves.

The two speakers stared silently at one another after this dictum.

— If I understand you correctly, Lord Ewald resumed in amazement, you are saying that *I myself* must learn *by rote* my various questions and answers!

— Don't doubt that you'll be able to modify them, *as you do in everyday life*, and just as ingeniously as you please — in such a manner that the anticipated response will fit. In fact, *let me assure you that every part of the scene will correspond with every other part, absolutely*. It is the great kaleidoscope of human words. Once the spirit is imbued with the tone and color of a subject, any vocable whatever can always be adapted to suit it, in the *perpetually approximate* world of human existence and human conversation. There are so many vague, suggestive words that



have such extraordinary intellectual elasticity! Their charm and profundity depend simply on the nature of *what they are answering!*

An example: let us suppose that a single word, the word *already*, is what the Android is going to say in a few moments. I take this particular word as an example, in lieu of many other possible phrases. You are expecting this word, which will be spoken in the grave and gentle voice of Miss Alicia Clary, and accompanied by a melting gaze of her lovely eyes.

Now, just imagine how many questions or thoughts there are to which this one word can respond magnificently. It will be up to you to create the depth and beauty of her response *in your own question*.

This is what you are always trying to do, in life, with your living lady; the trouble is simply that when it's this special word for which you're waiting, when you are expecting it so desperately because it would form such a noble harmony with your soul that you would like to be able to *inspire* this woman with it, *never*, NEVER does she pronounce it. It will FOREVER be a sour dissonant note, *another word in short*, that her native judgment suggests to her — and it will wring your heart.

Well, now, with the future Alicia, the real Alicia, the Alicia of your soul, you will no longer have to endure these sterile and bitter frustrations. The word that comes will always be the *expected* word; and its beauty will depend entirely on your own suggestive powers! Her "consciousness" will no longer be the negation of yours but, rather, will become whatever spiritual affinity your own melancholy suggests to you. You will be able to evoke in her the radiant presence of *your love alone*, without having to worry, this time, that she gives the lie to your dream! Her words will never deceive your hope! They will always be just as sublime...as your own inspiration knows how to make them. At the very least, you will never experience here that fear of being misunderstood which haunts you with the living woman; you will simply have to pay attention to the intervals engraved between the words she speaks. It may even become superfluous for you to articulate anything! Her words will reply to your thoughts, to your silences.

— Ah! Lord Ewald replied. If that's the extent of the comedy in which you are asking me to take part forever, it's an offer that I can only refuse — and I should tell you so at once.



## CHAPTER II

## Nothing New Under the Sun

*This too is vanity.*

— Ecclesiastes

Edison at this speech laid down on the table beside the Android the glittering instrument with which he was performing the autopsy of his creature, and lifted his head:

— A comedy, my lord? said he. But don't you agree to perform a comedy all the time with the original? Since, by your own confession, you must always disguise or conceal your own sincere thoughts — out of mere politeness?

Oh, who under the sun could be so strange as to imagine that he doesn't enact a comedy every day of his life until his death? The only people who pretend to the contrary are those who don't realize what role they are playing. Everybody plays in the comedy! And must, perforce! And every man with himself! Being sincere — that is the only dream that is absolutely beyond all hope of realization. Sincerity! How would it be possible in any case, since nobody knows anything? Since nobody is really persuaded of anything? Since nobody even knows who he really is? A man tries to convince his neighbor that he is, himself, convinced on some point, despite the fact that in his poorly stifled conscience he understands, he sees, he feels how doubtful the whole thing is. And why does he do this? In order to drape himself in a completely imaginary faith, which deceives nobody for a single instant and which the neighbor pretends to believe only in the hope that someone will return the same favor to him sometime soon. Comedy, I tell you! Actually, if people *could* be sincere, no society would last for an hour — since all men pass their lives concealing their thoughts, as you very well know! I challenge the most outspoken man in the world to be sincere for a single minute without getting his face smashed or finding himself obliged to smash someone else's. Again, what do we really know on any topic whatever that is not subject to a thousand different influences, from the age, from our social circumstances, from the temporary state of our spirits, and so on? As for love! Well, if two lovers could ever see each other *plainly, as they really are*, and know, really know, what they think *and the way each one thinks of the other* their passion would evaporate in an instant! Happily for them, they always manage to forget this inescapable law of physics, that "two atoms can never make real



contact with one another." And they never reach into one another's minds except in that infinite illusion of the dream that is innate within every child, and by which the human race perpetuates itself.

Without illusion, all things perish; there's no escaping it. Illusion is light itself! Look at the heavens from above the lower levels of the atmosphere, at an elevation of only four or five leagues: you see an abyss the color of ink, across which are scattered red sparks without any glitter. Evidently, it's the clouds, symbols of Illusion, which create light for us! Without them, nothing but perpetual Darkness. Our sky itself plays the Comedy of Light for us — and we should guide ourselves by its holy example.

As for lovers, as soon as they *believe* that they know one another, their attachment consists primarily of habit. They cling to a fantasy of their beings and their imaginations with which each has imbued the other; they hold to a phantom that each has conceived at the instigation of the other — eternal strangers that they are! But they are no longer devoted to one another *as they have recognized themselves to be*. An inescapable comedy, I tell you! As for the particular person you love, since she's nothing but an actress herself, and you think her most worthy of admiration when she's "acting a part," and she only charms you completely at such moments — well, what better can you ask for than her Android, which will be nothing but these special moments, selected and fixed for you, as if by enchantment?

— It's all very persuasive, said the young man, sadly. But . . . to hear exactly the same words for ever and ever? To see them always accompanied by the same expression, even though it's an admirable one? I'm afraid this comedy will very quickly come to seem . . . monotonous to me.

— I affirm, Edison replied, that when two persons love one another, every alteration of appearance can only involve loss of devotion; it can only alter the flow of passion and dissipate the dream. Hence these rapid revulsions of lovers when they see or think they finally see their true natures emerging from behind these artificial veils in which each of them has draped himself in order to please the other. They experience here nothing but a *difference* from their original dream, yet it suffices very often to make them hate or despise one another.

Why?

Because if one has discovered joy in a single special manner of thinking, what one wants at the bottom of one's heart is to preserve it without shadow or blemish, just as it is, without augment or diminution: for the best is the enemy of the good — *and novelty is the one thing that disenchants us*.



— Yes, it's true, murmured Lord Ewald, with a pensive smile.

— Well, then! The Android, as we've said, is nothing but the first hours of Love, immobilized, the hour of the Ideal made eternal prisoner. And already now you are complaining that this hour will not spread its inconstant wings to leave you! Oh, human nature!

— You must also think, Lord Ewald replied with a thin smile, that this aggregate of marvels stretched out on the table before us is nothing but a dead and empty group of substances without any awareness of their cohesion or of the future prodigy that will rise out of them.

You may be able to deceive my eyes, my senses, and my intelligence by this magical vision: but can I ever forget, within me, that she is only an impersonal object? My own self-consciousness cries out to me coldly: How does one love zero?

Edison looked at the Englishman.

— I've already demonstrated to you, he said, that in passionate love there is nothing but vanity piled on lies, illusions on unconsciousness, maladies heaped atop mirages. — Love zero, you say? Once again I ask you, what difference does it make if you are the unity placed before this zero, as you are now and always were before all the zeros of life — and if, in fact, this is the only such zero that will never disillusion or deceive you?

Didn't you say that every idea of possession was dead and extinct in your heart? I offer you nothing, as I've very clearly stated, but a transfiguration of your living beauty — that is to say, the very thing you begged of me when you cried: "Who will deliver this soul from this body for me!" And now already you are frightened in advance at the monotony of having your own wish realized. You want, now, to have the Shadow as changeable as the Reality! Well, I must prove to you now, as I will, that *you are trying here to impose an illusion on yourself*, since you cannot be ignorant, my lord, that *Reality* itself is not so rich in alterations, variations, or novelties as you are trying to make yourself believe. Let me remind you that neither the language of happy love nor the range of expression in the human face is as various as *your secret wish to retain a melancholy that you're already beginning to question* leads you to suppose.

The electrician reflected a moment. Then:

— To make eternal a single hour of love, the most beautiful of all — that moment, for example, when the mutual avowal is lost in the explosion of the first kiss — oh, to stop time at that moment, fix it, define it, make that spirit fresh and that first vow eternal! Would not that be the dream of every human being? It is only as a way of trying to recapture this ideal instant that people continue to love, in spite of all the differ-



ences and diminutions brought by subsequent hours. Oh, to have that moment, all by itself! Everything else is sweet only as it augments and recalls that supreme instant. How ever to weary of experiencing and reexperiencing that unique joy — the great, monotonous moment! The loved one represents nothing but this work of recapture forever before one, forever to be reattempted — one drives oneself mad in the attempt to recapture it. All the other hours of one's life do nothing but recoin in small change this hour of gold! If one could reinforce it by a few of the better instants, culled from subsequent nights, it would appear to be the ideal made palpable of all human felicity.

Having said so much in general, I should like to ask you this. If your beloved could be incarnated for you as she was in the hour when she seemed most beautiful, the hour when some god inspired within her those words which she did not in the least understand — but on the condition that you too would *repeat to her those words of yours which also made up a unique part of that moment, would you think you were "acting in a comedy" if you accepted this divine bargain?* Wouldn't you despise all the rest of the human vocabulary? And would this woman seem monotonous to you? And would you really grieve for all the subsequent hours when she seemed so different that you felt ready to die of it?

Wouldn't it be enough for you to have her soft glance, her gentle smile, her voice, her entire personality, as it was at that moment? Wouldn't you in fact think of reclaiming from Destiny all those other casual words, most of them either unfortunate or insignificant, from the treacherous moments that followed the flight of illusion? The man who loves, doesn't he repeat at every instant to his beloved the three little words, so exquisite and so holy, that he has already said a thousand times over? And what does he ask for, if not the repetition of those three words, or some moment of grave and joyous silence?

And in fact it's apparent that the best thing is to *rehear* the only words that can raise us to ecstasy, precisely because they have raised us to ecstasy before. It's precisely the same here as it is with a beautiful picture or a noble statue in which one discovers every day new beauties, new depths of meaning. A lovely piece of music is more delightful to hear the second time over than it is the first; one reads over a fine book without tiring of it, in preference to a thousand others through which one doesn't even want to skim. For one single beautiful thing contains the essential soul of all the others. A single woman contains, for the man who loves her, the souls of all other women. And when one of these absolutely perfect moments brushes us with its wing, we are so constructed *that we want no others*, and we will spend the rest of our



lives trying, in vain, to call this one back — as if the prey of the Past could ever be snatched from its jaws.

— Very well, so be it! said Lord Ewald bitterly. However, never to be able to *improvise* a single simple, natural word . . . that's bound to freeze up the springs of goodwill, even the most resolved.

— Improvise! cried Edison. Do you still believe that anybody improvises anything of any nature whatever? You don't believe that people are constantly *reciting*? Well, when you pray to God, isn't that all laid out for you in the prayerbooks that you learned by heart as a boy? Don't you read or recite, morning and night, the identical prayers, which were composed, *once and for all and all the better for that*, by men who had a gift for prayer, who knew how to go about it? Didn't God himself give you the formula for it, by saying: "When ye pray, let it be after this manner, and so on"? And isn't it true that for the last two thousand years other prayers have been nothing but pale dilutions of the one that he gave us?

Even in everyday life, isn't it true that most conversations have the formulaic sound of letter endings?

In actual truth, there's not a single word that isn't a repetition — and you don't need Hadaly to find yourself, every so often, in close conversation with a phantom.

Every human occupation has its repertoire of stock phrases, within which every man twists and turns till his death. His vocabulary, which seems to him so lavish, reduces itself to a hundred routine formulas at most, which he repeats over and over.

Probably you have never taken the pains or the pleasure to calculate the number of hours that a hairdresser who started in the trade at eighteen and is now sixty has spent saying to every chin he shaves: "Nice weather (or, rotten weather) we're having today." It's his way of starting a conversation, and if he gets an answer, it flows along for five minutes on this topic, to be *automatically* picked up by the next chin in his chair, and so on through the day, to be resumed again tomorrow. That makes a little more than *fourteen* solid years of the man's life, which is to say a quarter of his days on earth, more or less; the rest he employs in getting born, whining, growing up, drinking, eating, sleeping, and voting in an enlightened manner.

What do you expect anyone to improvise, alas! that hasn't already passed through a million mumbling mouths? We shorten, we adjust, we banalize, we babble, and that's all. Is all that noise worth regretting? Was it worth saying in the first place, or worth being listened to? Isn't it plain that Death, with his handful of mud, will be along tomorrow



to shut off all this insignificant blabber, all this hackneyed chatter in which we indulge when we think we're "improvising"?

And how can you hesitate to prefer, simply in terms of saving time, the wonderful verbal condensations composed by those who make a trade of words and a habit of thought — who could express by themselves alone the sensations of all Humanity? These global men have analyzed the subtlest shadings of the passions. What they have kept is the pure essence, which they express by condensing thousands of volumes into a single profound page. They are, in fact, us, whoever we may be. They are the incarnations of the god Proteus who lives in all our hearts. All our ideas, our words, our sentiments weighed to the last scruple are filed away in their minds, with their most remote ramifications, those we have never dared or ventured to reach. They know before we do and better than we can everything that our passions can suggest to us of the intense, the magical, the ideal. We can do no better, I assure you; and I see no reason why we should take special pains to talk worse than they do or to glory in our clumsiness on the score that at least it is our own, *personal* to us — since even this, as I've shown you, is nothing but an illusion.

— Go on then, with the anatomy of your inanimate lovely! said Lord Ewald after a pause for thought. I'm at the service of your discourse.

### CHAPTER III

## Walking

*Known by her gait, the goddess's self appeared.*

— Virgil

Responding to his friend, the engineer picked up his glittering glass tweezers and resumed his lecture:

— Time is short, he said, and I'll have barely time to give you a general idea of the possibility of Hadaly; but this will be perfectly adequate, the details being simply a matter of craftsmanship. What I must make clear to you, above all, is the really fabulous simplicity of the techniques used in my experiment.

In a word, I made it a point of pride to *demonstrate* in this work my ignorance before all the admirable pedants who are the glory of our kind.

Look here now: the Idol has silver feet, as a starry night. Finishing them off requires nothing but the addition of a snowy skin, the contouring of the ankles, the rosy nails and veins of your lovely singer, if I



imagine her correctly. Though these feet seem light in their step, they are less so in reality, because their hollow interior is filled with the heavy fluidity of quicksilver. This impermeable container of platinum which extends them is filled with liquid metal and rises, as it narrows, to the top of the calf in such a manner that the entire weight bears on the foot itself. In a word, we have here a pair of little buskins weighing fifty pounds each, and yet almost as skittish as those of a child. They seem as light as the feet of a bird, so powerful is the electromagnet that controls them and operates the femoral joint in what will be two future perfections.

The armature is separated at the waist, where this black veil was knotted a moment ago, by this supple zone, consisting of many short, delicate steel wires that reach below the thighs to bind the entire structure of the hips to the waist itself and to the lower part of the abdomen. This band, as you notice, is not circular; it is oval, with a slight forward inclination, like the lower line of a corset that ends in a point.

This gives to the waist of the Android (once it is covered with flesh, both resistant and flexible) that graceful yielding quality, that firm undulation, that elegant swaying which is so seductive in a mere woman. Note carefully that the wires are convex at the waist and concave at the forward part of the body, a circumstance that, thanks to the tension generated, allows the body to be held as erect as a delicate poplar tree and permits all the lateral movements available to the original. All the interactions of these precious steel wires are calculated; each one of them is under the direction of the central electric current which prescribes their individual flexions according to the pattern printed on the motor Cylinder.

You will be surprised at the *identity* of the charm which these programs can diffuse through the various attitudes of the body. If you cannot believe that female "grace" amounts to so little, take occasion sometime to examine the corset of Miss Alicia Clary, and calculate the difference in her movement, in the very lines of her body, without this artificial guide! You see, there are some of these unequal flexibilities in all our articulations, especially in those of the arms, whose infinite, languorous variations have cost me some long, sleepless nights.

Note also the turnings of the neck: joined with the movements transmitted by the wires of the waist, they are, I believe, of an irreproachable delicacy. It is the swan as woman; the degree of curvature and coordination is precise.

All this ivory bonework is superbly finished, don't you agree? This elegant skeleton is fastened to the armature by these crystal rings



within which every bone is free to move according to the precise kind of motion that is desired.

Before I tell you how the Android gets up, let us suppose that she is standing still. You want her to walk a particular distance, inscribed automatically into a certain number of steps. I've already explained that all you need do is issue your command through a ring, the amethyst, for the occult current to carry out the movements.

Here now is an explanation, much abbreviated and without commentary, of the physical theorem involved in these charts of the Android; these are the technical *means* by which she walks, the *possibility* will come out in the course of the demonstration, which will follow at once.

At the end of the neck of each femur, you observe here a small golden disk, slightly concave, rather like the crystal of a watch and about the size of a silver dollar.

Both are slightly tilted toward one another, and each is mounted on a long moving shaft built into the femoral bone itself.

In a state of rest, the upper part of these two shafts surmounts the height of the femur by about two millimeters, which produces a separation of the two little golden discs from the necks of their respective femurs.

The dimensions of their diameters marked B — which corresponds to dimension A of the Android's inner hip joint — is joined by a concave track of stainless steel, along which moves freely a crystal spheroid that is chiefly responsible for the action of walking. This globe weighs about eight pounds, because its hermetically sealed center is filled with quicksilver. At the least motion made by the Android it slides along the track from one to the other of these two golden discs.

Consider now, at the top of each leg, this little steel rod, hinged at the center; its two halves, opening below, play freely about a steel axle or hub. One end is solidly fastened to the dorsal interior of the armature — that is, *above* the zone of flexibility — the other to the anterior limit of each leg.

When the Android is lying flat, the two rods will be observed to fold at their centers, to form acute angles — in the anatomical area once immortalized under the name of Callipygian Venus. Note, please, that the steel hub that forms the apex of the angle is *lower* than the two ends of the rods.

You note these two solid interlocked arches that support the armature from within, to about the height of the lungs and extend, each of them, to the point where the anterior portion of the rods is fastened to each leg.



There, these arches twine together and slip, like a running knot, over the *anterior* part of the rods.

When the armature is closed, these steel pectoral bars, convex in form, adapt themselves in the manner of ribs to support and protect the internal mechanisms; they sustain and reinforce the two arches, and isolate them from all the other apparatus through which they pass beneath the phonographs.

At bottom, it's *more or less* the same physiological process by which humans walk, and though our machinery is a little better concealed, these means of locomotion differ from ours *only in their APPEARANCE to our eyes. What does that matter, as long as the Android can walk?*

The interaction of these steel wires serves to draw forward the weight of the torso, already somewhat inclined when the order to walk is given.

Above the angle of the rods, here are the magnets, each in communication with its wire, and here now is the master cable of the walking process. It is in direct contact with the electrodynamic apparatus from which it is separated by no more than three centimeters, just the thickness of the interruptor when this comes between the current and the wire.

This inductor reaches up into the thoracic cavity. There the two wires that correspond with the magnets of each leg come to receive their charge of dynamic current; each receives it in its turn, since one can get its charge only by interrupting the current leading to the other.

Except when the Android is lying down or when the interruptor is placed between the master cable and the magnets, the crystal spheroid is in constant motion from one golden disc to the other; it's held in that grooved track which moves in accordance with the movement of the legs. The leg that receives the crystal in its disk will be the first to move.

So much for theory; here now is the demonstration necessary to understand this rough outline.

We will suppose that, thanks to the slight but decisive inner impulse imparted by the electric impulse of the amethyst ring, the spheroid of crystal moves to its place on the disc atop the right leg, drawn by the mysterious impulse that impels it there.

The disc, raised above the end of the bone, sinks beneath the weight of the ball; its long shaft sinks into the femoral bone, causing contact to be made between the disc and the neck of the femur. The lower end of the shaft, as it gives way, makes contact with the inductive wire for that leg, which consequently receives energy from the generator.

The fluid reaches the magnet of the upper hip articulation and instantly multiplies its power. This magnet strongly attracts the inner



part of the connecting rod, the hub of iron; the acute angle widens on the spot to a straight line, and with considerable force, leading thus to the extension of the leg with which it is connected. This leg moves forward in its joint, but would remain suspended in air, if the weight of the body, communicated through the interlocked arches and the running knot to the anterior portion of the rods, were not carried forward toward the leg that has moved. Meanwhile that leg, under its own weight and that of the body combined, places its foot on the ground, having taken a step of about forty centimeters. I'll explain to you in a moment why the Android doesn't fall to one side or the other.

At the very instant when the foot touches the ground, a dynamic current reaches the magnets of the steel knee joint, and the knee, in its turn, flexes.

There's no abruptness in the *entirety* of this double tension, because each part is *integrated with the other*. Once the leg is covered with its artificial flesh, *which has all the elasticity of the original, it is human movement itself*. There's some abruptness in the release of our femur, but it is softened by the action of the knee, which always flexes later, as in the Android. Animate the joints of a skeleton; they will always seem jerky and *automatic* to you. It is the flesh, once again, and the effects of clothing, which soften all that.

The Android, once having placed her foot on the ground, would stand still in that position if the flexing of the knee did not automatically push up, about three centimeters above the femoral bone, the shaft of that disk which cradles the crystal globe. The disk, raised up in this fashion and no longer held absolutely straight by the neck of the femur, inclines slightly, because of its original positioning, in the direction of the left disk. The crystal globe falls into its metal track, rolls toward the other disk, and its weight, impetus, and inclination cause it to gain the golden disk of the left femur and nestle into it.

No sooner has this dropped in its turn under the weight of the spheroid than the interruptor of the right leg moves into place; the magnets there cease to be under the influence of a current, the hub of the right-hand connecting rod, *because it is heavier than the two ends*, drops down and reverts to its original acute angle, while the left connecting rod, stretching itself out and gently bringing the weight of the torso to bear on its leg, *reproduces the step of the Android — and so it proceeds indefinitely until it reaches the steps inscribed on the Cylinder, or until signaled by the ring*.

I must point out that the current is turned off in one knee only after it is turned on in the opposite knee, without which arrangement the



second knee would flex too soon. However, this never happens when, for example, the Android goes to her knees, lost in a mystical ecstasy like those sleepwalkers who can be made to pose by their hypnotists as if in a cataleptic trance, or like the pose of hysterics, who can be made to freeze by simply placing ten centimeters from their cervical vertebrae a hermetically sealed flask of cherry water.

It is the succession of these various flexions and tensions that gives the Android her gait of absolute human simplicity.

As for the very slight noise made by the crystal on its track and disks, it is completely muffled by the layer of flesh. Even without the armature, one could only hear it with a microphone.

#### CHAPTER IV

### The Eternal Female

*Cain: Are ye happy?*

*Satan: We are mighty.*

— Lord Byron, *Cain*

Drops of sweat stood like tears on the brow of Lord Ewald; he looked upon Edison's features, now glacial in their austerity. He felt that beneath this strident, scientific demonstration two things were hidden in the lecturer's infinite range of severely controlled secret thoughts.

The first was love of Humanity.

The second was one of the most violent shrieks of despair — the most chilling, the most intense, the most far-reaching, even to the Heavens, perhaps! — that was ever emitted by a living being.

In fact, what these two men were really saying, one with his literal interpretations of mathematical calculations, the other with his silent consent, signified nothing other than what is contained in the following words, addressed unconsciously to the unknown X of all primary causes:

"The young person whom you deigned to give me long ago, during the world's first nights, seems to me, nowadays, to have become the mere simulacrum of the sister you promised, and I no longer recognize enough of your imprint in the spirit moving her desolate form to treat her as a companion. — Ah, my exile becomes a weary one, if I must regard simply as the plaything of my earthly senses the woman whose sacred and consoling charms ought to raise before my eyes, so weary of the sight of the vacant heavens, at least the memory of what we have lost. After all these centuries and all these griefs, the permanent false-



hood of this shadow wearies me! It wearies me, and that's all it does; and I no longer care to grovel in those Instincts to which she tempts and attracts me, in an effort to believe, forever unsuccessfully, that she is my love.

"This is why, though but the creature of an instant, and knowing not whence I come, I stand here tonight in a grave, struggling — with a mocking laugh that contains all human sorrows, and with the help, such as I can obtain, of the old forbidden Science — to capture at least the mirage (nothing, alas, but the mirage!) of her whom your mysterious Clemency still allows me to desire."

Such were, approximately, the thoughts lurking in reality behind the cold analysis of the somber masterpiece.

Meanwhile, the electrician had touched a small enclosed transparent vessel full of distilled water located within the chest cavity of the Android. The concentrated carbon grid inside it slipped, at the almost imperceptible turn of a screw, into the water, and the current began to hum.

Suddenly the interior of the armature lit up like a human organism, flashing here and misty there, spangled with golden gleams and glittering lights.

Edison continued his talk.

— This lightly scented and pearl-colored smoke which floats like gauze under the black veil of Hadaly is simply vapor from the water absorbed by the battery, which burns the purplish atoms in order to generate the intense fulguration you see coursing like the current of Life itself through our new friend. This lightning that circulates through her is always under control, and does no harm of any sort. Look, now!

And so saying, Edison grasped the hand of the Android, while the electric current diffusing itself through the thousands of nerve endings in Hadaly hummed even more loudly.

— You see, *she is an angel!* he continued, speaking as solemnly as ever — if indeed it's true, as the theologians teach us, *that angels are simply fire and light!* Wasn't it Baron Swedenborg who went so far as to add that they are "hermaphrodite and sterile"?

After a moment of silence:

— We turn now to the question of Equilibrium. It has two aspects; lateral Equilibrium and circular Equilibrium. You've doubtless heard of the three sorts of equilibrium in physics: stable, unstable, and indifferent. It is a combination of these that sustains the movements of the Android. You will see that, to make Hadaly fall down, a stronger push is necessary than to make us fall — unless, indeed, it's your *desire* that she fall!



## CHAPTER V

## Equilibrium

*Stand up straight, my girl.*

— Advice from a mother

— Equilibrium is achieved in the following manner, continued the *deus ex machina*. I will show you as a sample the lateral equilibrium; the rest, included within the dorsal structure itself, is of the same sort.

In the first place, given electric fluid and magnets, Equilibrium is both possible and necessary. It follows that:

1. Whatever the position of the Android, a perpendicular line can be drawn from the clavicle down the spinal column, as far as the inner ankle, just as for us.

2. Whatever the position of these two “adorable” feet, they always constitute the limits of a horizontal line, from the middle of which springs a vertical, marking the Android’s *real* center of gravity, regardless of her position. Let me explain why.

The two hips of Hadaly are those of Diana the huntress! But their silvery interiors contain these two vascular platinum cells, the function of which I will explain in a moment. Their surfaces, though polished, are held in place by the walls of the iliac cavities because of their sinuous shape.

These cells, shaped above to conform to the iliac walls, are shaped below into rectangular cones inclined toward one another to form an angle of forty-five degrees to the vertical. The two points of these cells, if they were extended further, would meet at a point between the legs, just about the level of the Android’s knees.

These two lines form, accordingly, the fictive inverted apex of a triangle, the hypotenuse of which would be an imaginary horizontal cutting the torso in two.

The line of the terrestrial equator does not *exist* — it *is*! Always ideal and imaginary, it is still just as *real* as if it were tangible, don’t you agree? Well, such are the lines of which I’m going to tell you now, and whose *reality* underlies, at every moment of our being, our own Equilibrium.

Having exactly calculated the various weights of the mechanisms fixed above this ideal horizontal and placed them at the desired angles, I suppose that the direction of these various weights could be schematized in a second triangle, placed like the first upside down, with



its apex at the imaginary center of the hypotenuse of the first triangle. The base of this upper triangle would be formed by a second horizontal connecting the two shoulders. The apexes of both my triangles would thus fall on the same vertical axis.

Under the conditions so far considered, the entire weight of the body, standing erect and motionless, would necessarily fall along that ideal vertical drawn from the middle of the Android's brow and ending at the center of a line drawn between her two feet.

But as every motion risks a fall in one direction or another, the two large and deep platinum cells are filled *exactly* half full of quicksilver. Just halfway below the surface of this metal they are connected to one another by these two flexible tubes of steel lined with platinum which you see in position here, directly beneath the motor Cylinder.

At the center of the upper disc that hermetically seals each of the cells is fastened the end of a sort of arc, forged of very pure, very sensitive, and very powerful steel. The other end is attached very solidly to the upper part of that silver cavity within the hip, which is the container, *VIRTUALLY just adhering*, of the two cells. This arc not only is held down by the weight of the quicksilver, which is twenty-five pounds, but is forced into place by the weight of a *SINGLE CENTIMETER* of extra mercury above the inner level of each cell. The arc would try to raise them by this extra centimeter toward the upper part of the iliac cavity *if it were not held down to the exact level of the mercury by this little steel loop which the cell encounters at just this level on the wall of the cavity.*

Thus the light tension of the arc remains *CONSTANT* because of this obstacle. The upper disc sealing each cell is therefore always in contact with the steel loop when the level of quicksilver is the same in both cells.

But whenever the Android moves, this fluid level alters, because this strange metal is constantly flowing from one to the other of the two cells, by means of the two tubes. At the slightest inclination to one side or the other, they send an excess of quicksilver into the cell on the side of the body about to lose its balance.

The slippery platinum cell, then, sliding down under this extra weight within its containing walls, increases the tension of the arc. This flow of quicksilver in the direction toward which the Android is already leaning would lead her to fall even quicker, if the conical point of the metallic cell, as soon as the *second* centimeter of its incumbent quicksilver flowed away, did not, in the act of giving way beneath this weight, and by so doing deinsulate itself, encounter a dynamic cur-



rent of electricity. This current animates the gradual release of the system of magnets fixed to the wall of each cell, which reverses the flow of quicksilver and forces into the opposite cell just the quantity of quicksilver necessary for the desired counterweight. This is the **CONSTANT** flux and reflux that, except when she is resting, corrects the **FUNDAMENTAL** instability of the body. Considering the angle at which the vascular cones are set, we see that the Android's center of gravity is *only* **APPARENT**, is only unstable in the fluctuating level of the mercury. Without that, the Android might fall, however prompt the transfer. But the *real* center of gravity, thanks to this arrangement of the cones (and that's an extremely simple calculation, altogether elementary), is quite **OUTSIDE** the Android, in the interior of a vertical that drops from the upper point of the cone's widening — from the point, I say, farthest from the *apparent* visual center of the Android — alongside her person, next to the unmoving leg, and so to the ground; and this counterbalances laterally the weight of the leg that has been moved.

This oscillation, involving counterflow of the metal and displacement of the center of gravity, is as constant as the current that animates and controls its flow. The tensions of the arc are continually alert to the slightest movement of the Android, and the level of the quicksilver in the two cells is constantly changing. The two steel tubes are thus equivalent to *the balancing rod of an acrobat*. From the outside, though, not a quiver is seen to betray this inner balancing of tensions from which the first equilibrium arises; nothing, any more than such quivering is sensed in us.

As for equilibrium as a whole, you see from the shoulder blades down to the lower lumbar vertebrae these intricate interwoven passages through which the quicksilver circulates constantly, counterbalancing its own weight by instant translations of its inertia into electromagnetic systems. This is the apparatus that allows the Android to get up, lie down, bend over, stand, and walk as we do. Thanks to their delicate operations, you can see Hadaly stoop to pick up a flower without the slightest fear of falling.



## CHAPTER VI

## Something Striking

*The wise man laughs only in fear and trembling.*

— Proverbs

— I've done no more than sketch for you in broad outlines the possibility of the phenomenon; the few minutes I have left (here it is, midnight already) will allow me only to skim over a few additional details.

Only the first Android was difficult. Once the general formula was written, as I've said before, all that remained was a kind of handicraft work. There's no doubt that in the near future substrata like this one will be fabricated by the thousands; the first manufacturer who picks up the idea will be able to establish a factory for the production of Ideals!

At this touch of wit, Lord Ewald, whose nerves were already on edge, began to laugh, lightly enough at first; then, seeing that Edison was laughing too, a strange sort of hilarity gained upon him. The place, the hour, the character of the experiment, the very idea that they shared — for a long moment everything seemed to him as terrifying as it was absurd, so that, probably for the first time in his life, he was overcome by a fit of convulsive laughter, the echoes of which resounded through this underground Eden.

— You are a terrible mocker, he said.

— We have no time to lose, replied the electrician. I'm now going to explain what procedures I will use to confer on this moving Possibility the entire exterior appearance of your favored lady.

At the touch of his finger, the exterior armature closed slowly; the porphyry table tilted till its end touched the ground.

Hadaly was standing erect between her two creators.

Motionless, veiled, silent, you would have said she was looking out on them from behind the shadows that veiled her features.

Edison touched one of the rings on Hadaly's silver-gloved hand.

The Android quivered from head to foot; she became once more an apparition, an animate phantom.

The sense of bitter disillusion left in Lord Ewald's soul by the recent anatomy lesson faded somewhat at her new appearance.

Shortly, the young man, having regained control of himself, looked at her anew, even though his reason still revolted, with that indefinable



sentiment which she had aroused in him before.

The dream began anew, picking up where it had left off only a short while previously.

— Are you quite recovered now? Edison asked the Android coldly.

— *Perhaps!* Hadaly replied, in her marvelous dreamlike voice from behind her black veil.

— What an expression! murmured the young lord.

Already the movement of respiration was stirring the breast of the Android.

Suddenly, crossing her hands and bowing gently toward Lord Ewald, she said to him in laughing tones:

— And, in return for my trouble, will you allow me to beg a favor of you, my lord?

— Gladly, Miss Hadaly, said he.

And while Edison was collecting his scalpels, she turned away toward the banks of subterranean flowers; then, having picked up a big black purse of silk and velvet, similar to that used by mendicant friars, which hung by its straps from a small shrub, she returned to the stupefied Englishman.

— My lord, she said, I believe that in the world no evening of pleasure is quite complete unless it includes some redeeming work of charity amid its other attractions. Will you therefore allow me to ask your charity in behalf of a most respectable young woman — a young widow — and her two children!

— What does this mean? Lord Ewald asked Edison.

— Well, in fact, I hardly know myself, the inventor replied. Let's listen to her, my lord; she often has surprises of this sort for me.

— Indeed, continued the Android, I beg your charity in behalf of this poor woman — whom only the need to care for her children keeps alive: if she did not have to provide for them, I doubt if she would survive a single day. For undeserved misfortune has exalted her soul to the point where it thirsts for Death. A kind of perpetual ecstasy has raised her out of this world and renders her indifferent to all deprivation, incapable of any effort to support herself — except for her children. Her present state of mind has numbed her to all worldly considerations, to the point that she has exchanged her name on earth for another, so she says, a name by which *voices*, strange *voices*, have called her in her dreams. — Will you then, you who come from the world of the living, answer this my first prayer by *joining your charity to mine*?

So saying, she took from a nearby table several gold pieces, which she dropped into the purse.



— Whom do you have in mind, Miss Hadaly? asked Lord Ewald, coming closer to the Android.

— It is Mrs. Anderson, my lord Celian, the wife of that wretched man *who killed himself for love — as I'm sure you recall — for love of those miserable objects you saw over there, just a moment ago.*

And she pointed at the drawer in the wall, where the relics were kept.

Despite all his self-control, Lord Ewald recoiled before the sight of Hadaly, bowing to him and holding in her hand this purse for religious offerings.

Of all the images he had seen, this one appeared the most sinister, and something in this particular act of charity seemed to indict, through him, Humanity at large.

Wordlessly, he dropped several bank notes into the black purse.

— Thank you, in the name of the two orphans, my lord Celian! said Hadaly, disappearing amid the pillars of the cavern.

## CHAPTER VII

### I Am Black but Comely

*There are some secrets better not told.*

— Edgar Allan Poe

Lord Ewald watched her disappear.

— What astonishes me most, my dear Edison, he said at last, what is most incomprehensible of all to me, is that your Android can converse with me, call me by name, answer my questions, and direct herself unfalteringly through the various obstacles of this room and the one upstairs. I say these facts are positively inconceivable in that they suppose some sort of discerning intelligence in her. You cannot explain to me by means of talking phonographs how she offers such precise replies to questions before a human voice has had time to record them, or how a moving cylinder can dictate to a metallic phantom gestures, motions, and steps, which I suppose could be calculated, but only after a very long, very complicated process. The thing is possible, I concede it; but it must demand enormous preparations and the most scrupulous exactitude.

— Well, I will simply say that the details you mention are, *of all others, the very easiest to create.* I'll prove it, you have my word. You would be even more surprised by the simplicity of the explanation, if I gave it



to you here and now, than you are by the apparent mystery. But, as I've already said, in the interests of the necessary illusion, I think it best to put off revealing this secret. But, something else! Hasn't it struck your notice, my lord, that in all this time you haven't asked me a single question about *the present facial expressions of the Android?*

Lord Ewald faltered.

— Since her face is veiled, he said, I thought it would not be very discreet for me to ask about it.

Edison stroked his chin and looked at Lord Ewald with a grave smile.

— I supposed, he said, that you were not eager to create a memory in your mind which might rise up and disturb the vision I have promised you. The face that I could show you this evening would remain fixed in your memory, and would forever suffuse those future features in which your hopes are eternally embodied. The memory would impede your illusion by constantly raising unconscious thoughts of duality. That is why, even if this veil concealed the face of an ideal Beatrice, *you don't want to see it* — and you are right. And it is for an analogous reason that I cannot reveal to you, today, the secret of which you just spoke.

— So be it! said Lord Ewald.

Then, as if trying to dissipate the mist of uncertainty that had just risen, he asked:

— Are you, then, going to cover Hadaly with flesh identical to that of my beloved?

— Yes, said Edison. I take it that you understand, my lord, we are not yet dealing with the Epidermis, but simply with the flesh, and that alone.

## CHAPTER VIII

### Flesh

*A woman's body! Sacred clay! Oh, marvelous!*

— Victor Hugo

— You recall the arm and hand in my laboratory, which surprised you so much when you felt them up there? That's the same substance I will use.

The flesh of Miss Alicia Clary is composed of graphite in certain proportions, of nitric acid, water, and various other simple chemical substances that can be identified through an examination of the subcutaneous tissues. That of course doesn't explain why you love the lady.



Similarly, a reconstruction of the elements of Android flesh would serve no purpose here. The hydraulic press as it coagulates them into a homogeneous mass (just as Life incorporates various chemicals to make our flesh) literally transfigures their various *individualities* into a synthesis that cannot be analyzed but can certainly be experienced.

For example, you couldn't possibly imagine the extent to which iron dust, reduced to an almost impalpable powder, magnetized, whitened, and distributed through the flesh, renders it susceptible to the action of electricity. The extremely fine nerve endings of those electric wires which pass through imperceptible openings in the armature reach far into the fibrous applications of this flesh — over which the diaphanous membrane of the Epidermis is spread, and to which it is marvelously obedient. Carefully modulated electric currents animate these tiny particles of metal, and these impulses are translated into almost imperceptible movements according to the micrometric instructions of the Cylinder. Some movements are interwoven with others, or overlaid upon them; this intergrafting of successive motions can be so subtly compounded as to give rise to what we can only call *instantaneous delays*. The steady continuity of the electric current eliminates any possibility of jerkiness, and thanks to it one can achieve smiles of infinite subtlety, the expression of the Mona Lisa, tenderness, intimacy, and absolute identities that are really terrifying.

This flesh, which easily absorbs the caloric warmth engendered by *my* elements, responds to our touch with the amazing impression, the resilience, the fresh firmness of Life; it creates that indefinable sentiment of *human affinity*.

As it should show through, softened by the Epidermis, its tone is that of snow tinged with the smoke of amber and pale roses; it also has a slight sparkle imparted to it by a very light dusting of pulverized amianthus. Photochromic action makes the color permanent; hence, the Illusion.

I have accordingly undertaken to make Miss Alicia Clary agree, this very night, to take part in our experiment; she will not know what she is doing and will agree as eagerly as you can imagine. Let me assure you that, given the single fact of feminine vanity, the task will be incredibly easy — you'll appreciate it yourself.

Since we observe all the conventions here, my first assistant is also a woman, a great unknown sculptress, who will begin work on a statue of Miss Clary tomorrow morning in my studio. It's indispensable for this work that your beloved be nude, and she will have no other transposer than this great artist, who never idealizes but copies exactly. In



order to grasp the precise mathematical form of your living lady, she will begin by taking, very quickly, in response to my detailed instructions, and with instruments of the most absolute precision, measurements of the waist, height, bust, feet, hands, legs, arms, and face with all its features, as well as the weight of your young friend. It will be a matter of no more than half an hour.

Hadaly, unseen, erect, but concealed behind the four large cameras, will be waiting for her incarnation.

And then it will come to pass that this carnal substance, glittering and human at the same time, will unite, by subtle and complex procedures, with the Android armature, according to the natural proportions of the living beauty. As this substance can be worked to great precision by very delicate tools, the vagueness of a preliminary sketch disappears quickly; the original declares itself and the features appear, but without color or great detail; it is the statue waiting for Pygmalion its creator. The head alone demands as much sustained work and care as the rest of the body; this is because of the movement of the eyelids, the delicacy of the earlobes, the slight motion of the nostrils while drawing breath. Besides, there are some special transparencies to come, like the veining of the temples and the folds of the lips, which are made of material more finely formed by the hydraulic press than any other part of the body. Imagine, if you will, the fine magnetic tolerances (the magnets themselves are indicated by these thousands of luminous points in this photographic enlargement of a smile) to which a whole network of invisible inductors must be employed micrometrically, each insulated from the others. Oh, in a general way I have all the materials and formulas at hand — but a *perfect* resemblance, which is indispensable, requires long and meticulous labor: seven days at least, as when creating a world. Remember, if you will, that mighty Nature herself, with all her resources, still puts some sixteen years and nine months into creating a pretty girl! And all those rough sketches she has to go through! All of them modified every few days, leading to an end product that lasts all too short a time, one that a single illness can snuff out overnight!

When this is completed, we attack the problem of ABSOLUTE resemblance of features and of the general lineaments.

You know the fabulous results obtained by Photosculpture. One can achieve an absolute transposition of the subject's appearance. I have new instruments, perfected to a miracle, which were designed years ago under my supervision. With their help we will be able to transfer the identical outlines, down to the very slightest and most gradual con-



tours, down to a tenth of a millimeter! Miss Alicia Clary will thus be photosculpted directly onto Hadaly, that is, onto the first sketch, sensitized for that purpose, in which Hadaly will already have begun to take silent form.

At this point all imprecision disappears; the slightest touch of excess leaps to the eye! Besides, the microscope is available to us. For we *must* create this refraction with the total fidelity of a mirror. A great artist, whom I've inspired with enthusiasm for the special art of revising my phantoms, will come to provide the finishing touches.

The pattern of the flesh tones must be made perfect; for the Epidermis, which is still to come, is as delicate as a flower petal, satiny and translucent, and colors fade so easily that we must forestall that process and fix them in advance — quite apart from the solar resources of which we shall be making use in just a little while.

At this stage we find ourselves in the presence of an Alicia Clary as she might be seen in the fog of a London evening.

This, however, is the moment — that is, before we even raise the question of the Epidermis and all the problems that implies — when we must concern ourselves with the intimate, indefinite, personal emanation that mingles with the fragrances she customarily uses, to float like a cloud around the woman you have loved.

It is, so to speak, the atmosphere of her presence, *l'odor di femina* of Italian poetry. As we know, every feminine flower has a scent that is characteristic of her.

You spoke before of a sultry perfume whose charm still disturbed you and harrowed your heart even today. At bottom, it is the attraction, quite special for you, involved in the beauty of this young woman, which filled this sensual odor with idealized charm. A man basically indifferent to the lady would have remained indifferent to the perfume as well.

The first question, then, is simply to obtain mastery over the complex reality of the sensual perfume *in its chemical components*; the rest of the process is taken care of by your feelings. We proceed by perfectly simple techniques, as the perfume manufacturer fills his scents with the aromas of particular fruits and flowers. The result is identity. The whole thing will be made clear in a moment.



## CHAPTER IX

## Rosy Mouth, Pearly Teeth

*The beautiful Madame X . . . , for whose favors the cream of our noble youth were in fierce competition, owed in large part the charm of her dainty, pouting mouth to the daily use of Botot's patented antiseptic.*

— An advertisement of yesteryear

— But first, my lord, a question, a rather odd question, if you will allow it. Does Miss Alicia Clary still make use of all her own teeth?

Lord Ewald, after a gesture of surprise, nodded in affirmation.

— I approve of the decision, Edison went on, though it's by no means in accord with American fashion. Here, you must understand, all our fine misses who aspire to real elegance, even though they have in their mouths all the pearls of the Pacific, are, with few exceptions, starting to have them pulled and replaced by dentures, which are far more exact, perfect, and light than their own natural teeth.

However it may be with Miss Alicia Clary in this regard (and things, after all, can change very fast), her present set of organic teeth will be reproduced with a dazzling fidelity.

I have arranged for the excellent Doctor Samuelson, accompanied by the dentist W. Pejor, to be in my laboratory on the day of the sixth session.

With the help of an anesthetic devised by me, and almost odorless, so Miss Alicia Clary will not even notice that she is breathing it, we will render her quite unconscious; during this lapse, we will take an exact print of her teeth, as well as of her tongue, with an eye to transferring exact duplicates of both into the twin mouth of Hadaly.

You have talked of the effects of light on the teeth when a person is smiling. Once the adaptation is completed, you will not be able to tell one set from the other.



## CHAPTER X

## Corporal Fragrances

*Though roses fallen in the wind  
Have blown away and out to sea,  
You yet may breathe at every turn  
Their fragrant memory in me.*

— Marceline Desbordes-Valmore

— When your pretty friend wakes up, we will tell her that she has fainted, no more than that: every lady of “distinction” does so now and again, but to prevent any such incidents in the future, Samuelson will write a long and learned prescription advising her to take certain warm-air baths in an establishment of his founding.

Miss Alicia Clary will go there next day.

Once she transpires, he will collect, as one collects acids on litmus paper, using very precise machines, all of the vapors of this young lady’s corporal emanations, from head to toe, isolating each of the transpiring parts.

This analysis will be done in his own private laboratory, with all the time in the world at his disposal. Once he has identified the different chemical components, he can easily reduce to formula the various perfumes of this attractive creature. No doubt he will achieve, with only infinitesimal variations, an exact correspondence.

Once this result is obtained, one dissolves the chemical compound in a liquid base, and saturates the Flesh with it by a process of volatilization, proceeding through the body limb by limb and conforming in every way with the nuances of Nature, just as I previously said a clever perfumer can saturate an artificial flower with the appropriate odor. That is why the sample arm up above is imbued with the warm personal perfume of its model.

When the Flesh is thus saturated with perfumes and covered by the Epidermis, the perfumes remain as permanently as in a sachet. The rest, the Ideal, you will supply yourself. And let me tell you, that devil Samuelson on several occasions has tricked the senses of an animal by the *trueness* of his imitations. I have seen him drive a basset hound into a frenzy, barking and snapping at a piece of artificial flesh, because he had rubbed it with some simple chemical equivalents to the scent of a fox!

A fresh attack of hilarity in Lord Ewald interrupted the inventor.



— Don't mind me, my dear Edison, he cried. Go on! Go on! It's marvelous! I must be dreaming! I can't stop — and yet I don't really want to laugh.

— Ah! I understand your feelings, Edison said sadly. I understand them and I share them. But just think how many little *nothings* like this, added one to the other, produce sometimes an irresistible impression! Think of all the *nothings* on which Love itself depends!

Nature changes; the Android, never. We others, we live, we die — what do I know? The Android knows neither life nor illness nor death. She is above *all* the imperfections and all the humiliations. She preserves the beauty of the dream. She is an *inspiration*. She speaks and sings like a genius — better, even, for in her magical words are contained the thoughts of several geniuses. Her heart never changes; she hasn't got one. Your duty will be, therefore, to destroy her in the hour of your death. A fairly good charge of nitroglycerine, or of panclastite if you prefer, will be quite adequate to reduce her to dust and hurl her form to the outer limits of ancient space.

## CHAPTER XI

### Urania

*This star which gleams like a tear.*

— George Sand

Hadaly appeared toward the rear of the chamber; she wandered toward them through the flowering bushes of that perpetual summertime.

Draped in an ample robe of long black satin, and still carrying her bird of paradise on her shoulder, she approached her visitors from earth.

Once near the credenza she refilled two glasses of sherry and came in silence to present them.

Her guests having thanked her with a gesture, she carried off the empty glasses to replace them where they had stood.

— Twelve thirty-two, said Edison, glancing at his watch. Quick now, let's consider the matter of the Eyes. By the way, speaking of your future eyes, Hadaly, tell me — can you see Miss Alicia Clary from here *with the eyes you now have?*

Hadaly seemed to draw back into herself for a moment before answering the question.

— Yes, she said.



— Well, then, tell us what she's wearing, what she's doing, where she is.

— She is alone, in a railway carriage that's moving quite fast; she has your message in her hand, and is trying to read it over. Here she lifts it in order to bring it closer to the light; but the train is going so fast, she can't hold it steady. She sits down; she cannot stand up anymore!

And at these last words, Hadaly laughed gaily; her laugh was echoed, more loudly, and in a strong tenor voice, by the bird of paradise.

Lord Ewald understood that the Android was making the point that she too could laugh, and at living beings.

— Since you have the gift of second sight, Miss Hadaly, said he, would you be kind enough to describe for us the costume she is wearing?

— She is wearing a dress of a blue so light that by lamplight it seems almost green, said Hadaly. She is fanning herself now with a fan of ebony, its ribs decorated with black flowers. On the material of the fan a statue is represented...

— This is beyond all belief! murmured Lord Ewald. She's right on every single point. Your telegrams must be amazingly swift!

— My lord, said the inventor, you may ask Miss Alicia Clary herself if three minutes after the train left New York for Menlo Park the incident that Hadaly has described for us didn't actually happen. But would you be good enough to chat with her for a moment while I go off to select some specimens of our incomparable eyes?

And he stepped off toward the rear of the cavern, tapped a stone in the last pillar, and seemed to lose himself in studying some small objects hidden in that spot.

— Would you be kind enough to explain to me, Miss Hadaly, Lord Ewald asked her, the function of that complicated machine sitting on the table over there?

— Gladly, my lord Celian, replied Hadaly, turning aside to look from under her veil at the mechanism in question. It's another invention of our friend. It serves to measure the heat of starlight.

— Ah, yes! I recall there was some talk of it in the newspapers, Lord Ewald replied with fantastic equanimity.

— That's right, Hadaly went on. Before, long before the Earth was even part of a nebula, stars were shining, as they had shone for a sort of eternity; but alas!, so far from the earth that their radiant light, though it travels at nearly one hundred thousand leagues per second, is only now arriving at the place in the Heavens occupied by Earth. Indeed, it may be that numbers of these stars have been extinguished by the time earthly mortals were able to see their light; yet the ray emitted from



these stars when they were alive continues to survive them, passing irrevocably into space, and perhaps arriving at our planet. So that the man who looks up and admires the Heavens is often looking at suns that no longer exist, which he nonetheless perceives as a result of that phantom ray in the Illusion of the universe.

Well, my lord Celian, this mechanism is so sensitive that it can record the energy, almost nonexistent, almost imaginary, of a beam from one of these stars. There are even some stars so remote that their light will reach the Earth only when Earth itself is a dead planet, as they themselves are dead, so that the living Earth will never be visited by that forlorn ray of light, without a living source, without a living destination.

Often on fine nights when the park of this establishment is vacant, I amuse myself with this marvelous instrument. I go upstairs, walk across the grass, sit on a bench in the Avenue of Oaks — and there, in my solitude, I enjoy the pleasure of weighing the rays of dead stars.

Hadaly fell silent.

Lord Ewald felt his head spin; he fell back on the notion that what he was seeing and hearing, because it was impossible, could only be completely natural.

— Here are the Eyes! cried Edison, returning to Lord Ewald with a jewel case in his hand.

At his words the Android turned away and stretched out on the black couch, as if deliberately withdrawing from the conversation.

## CHAPTER XII

### The Eyes of the Spirit

*My child has somber eyes, profound and vast,  
Like you, oh Night immense, and lit like yours!*  
— Charles Baudelaire

Lord Ewald's direct glance challenged Edison:

— You told me that the problems of creating an electromagnetic being were easy to solve, *the result alone was mysterious*. Indeed, you have kept your word; for already, this result seems to me almost completely foreign to the means used to obtain it.

— Note if you will, my lord, Edison answered, that hitherto I've only given you explanations, more or less conclusive, for certain preliminary *physical* problems presented by Hadaly. But I warned you that various other phenomena of an altogether different and superior order would



manifest themselves in her — and it was there and only there that she became EXTRAORDINARY! Now among these phenomena there is one, of which I can observe the various evidences and consequences without being in any way able to account for what produces them.

— You're not speaking of electric current, are you?

— No, my lord; it is another sort of current that is acting on the Android at this very moment. One experiences its action without being able to analyze it.

— Then it wasn't some clever trick with telegrams that enabled Hadaly just now to describe for me the costume of Miss Alicia Clary?

— If that had been the case, my lord, I would have begun by explaining it to you. I withhold from my explanations only that part of the Illusion which is strictly necessary in order to preserve the possibility of your dream.

— Still, I can scarcely believe that invisible spirits will take on themselves the function of conveying to human beings information on random travelers.

— Neither do I believe any such thing, said Edison. Still, Doctor William Crookes, who has discovered a fourth state of *Matter*, the radiant state (in addition to the three we knew before, the solid, liquid, and gaseous), gives us many accounts of spiritualist experiences; they are supported by serious scholars in England, America, and Germany who have seen, touched, and heard the same things that he has seen, touched, and heard: I find his stories worthy of serious consideration.

— But you cannot really maintain that, here or elsewhere, this unconscious creature has actually seen the woman of whom we are talking. And yet the details she specified concerning the costume of Miss Clary are absolutely exact. However wonderful the eyes you have in this box, I don't suppose they have any such power as that.

— All I can tell you on this point (*for the present, at any rate*) is this: *the power behind Hadaly's veil* which sees at a distance and through all obstacles sees without the aid of electricity.

— I hope you'll tell me more than that someday; will you?

— You have my promise; and she too will explain her own mystery on some evening of stars and silence.

— Good; but what she says is like those shadowy thoughts that the spirit encounters in its dreams — they dissipate the instant one awakens. Thus, when Miss Hadaly was talking to me just now about those stars that Science calls lumps of carbon, she expressed herself, not altogether inexact, but as if her "reason" were guided by a *sort of logic quite different from our own*. Will I be able to understand her?



— Better than I do! said Edison, you may be sure of it, my lord. As for her way of grasping the concepts of astronomy — Good Lord, her logic is as good as anyone else's. Ask some erudite cosmographer, if you choose, well, for example, *why a single solar system contains heavenly bodies rotating on different axes? Or, if you prefer, what are the rings of Saturn?* You'll soon see if he knows much more about these matters than she does.

— To hear you talk, Lord Ewald murmured with a smile, one would think this Android has a notion of the Infinite!

— Not much more than a notion of it, the engineer replied gravely, but that she has — and to establish the fact, you must question her according to the strangeness of her nature. That is to say, you must use no solemn, pompous language but, instead, talk to her in an almost *playful* fashion. Her answers then will give an imaginative impression much more striking than ideas of a conventionally serious or even sublime character.

— Give me an example of the right sort of question, Lord Ewald demanded. Prove to me that somewhere within her lies concealed — in whatever shape or form — the notion of the Infinite.

— Gladly, said Edison.

He stepped over to the dozing Android:

— Hadaly, he said, let's suppose that by some impossibility a god, of the sort that used to exist, should rise up invisible and unlimited through the ether of the universe, and suddenly unleash alongside our world a flash of electricity of the same sort as that which animates you, but infinitely more powerful, and capable of neutralizing gravity itself — so that the whole solar system would be hurled into the abyss like a sack of apples being emptied out.

— Well? said Hadaly.

— Well, what would you think of such an event, if you were in a position to cast your eyes over the whole terrifying scene?

— Oh, said the Android, speaking in her grave, low voice, and lifting the bird of paradise to a perch on her silvery fingers, I suspect this episode would pass, in the Infinite reaches of space, without attracting much more attention than you bestow on the thousands of sparks that flare up and die down in the fireplace of an ordinary family.

Lord Ewald stared at the Android without saying a single word.

— So now you see, Edison said casually, turning toward him, Hadaly seems to understand certain notions just as well as you or I. But she translates them only through a somewhat individualistic system of imagery, by her own personal metaphors, so to speak.



Lord Ewald stood still for a while, musing.

— My dear sorcerer, he said at last, I'm quite incapable of understanding these things that are going on around me; I put myself entirely in your hands.

— Here, then, are the Eyes! said the inventor, opening the jewel case before him.

### CHAPTER XIII

## Physical Eyes

*Your sapphire eyes, like split almonds.*

— The poets

The interior of the strange box seemed to cast a thousand different glances at the young Englishman.

— Here now, are some eyes that would put to shame the gazelles of the vale of Nourmahal; they are jewels, gifted with a sclera so pure, a pupil so deep, that they are really upsetting — don't you find them so? The art of the great oculists has gone far beyond Nature in our time.

The solemnity of these eyes positively gives one the sense of a soul behind them.

The addition of color photography gives them a personal touch; the iris is the special point to which one is bound to transfer individuality of expression. A single question here: Have you seen many fine eyes in the world, my lord?

— Yes indeed, said Lord Ewald; particularly in Abyssinia.

— You distinguish the flashing of the eyes from the beauty of the glance, do you not? Edison pursued.

— Of course, Lord Ewald replied. The woman you will be seeing before long has eyes of the most striking beauty when she looks off in the distance at nothing in particular — but when she looks at something specific and nearby, the expression of her look is enough, alas!, to make one forget her eyes entirely.

— Now that's what simplifies many difficulties! cried Edison. Generally the expression of the human face is augmented by a thousand exterior influences, such as the imperceptible flutter of the lids, the immobility of the brows, the length of the lashes, and, above all, by what one is saying, the circumstances, the surroundings, the whole ambience that reflects itself in a glance. All that reinforces the *natural* expressiveness of the eye. In our days, well-bred women have all acquired



one particular expressive glance, worldly, conventional, and simply charming (that's the word for it); every man finds in it whatever he wants, and the woman is free to pursue her personal thoughts while seeming to pay profound attention to something else.

One could easily copy this expression, since in itself it's nothing but a copy — am I right?

— It's true, said the young man, smiling.

— But, the engineer went on, in the particular experiment we are making, the important thing is to catch not the attentive glance but the VAGUE one. And you've told me that Miss Alicia Clary commonly looks out from behind her lashes. Well, here's how I will go about it. I was talking to you just now about the radiant state of Matter. Given the most complete and perfect *void* that can be produced (as in a hollow sphere containing air that has been subjected to an extremely high temperature, and then sealed), it's said that one can find in this void, as abstract as possible, motions due to the presence of an unidentifiable form of Matter. Various induction wires having been fastened to the inner walls of this sphere, vibratory motions are felt within the void; one can very well suppose that the *Beginnings of Physical Motion* are there.

Here now are a number of artificial Eyes, perfectly shaped and as pure in color as fresh spring water. Among them I'll certainly find a pair corresponding with your friend's.

Once having established in the pupil what painters call a point of vision, and having created within the eyeball itself that necessary void, I will insert within the pupil, by means of an extremely delicate inductor, a tiny point of light — vague, almost invisible — created by Electricity. The marvelous work of the iris will then confer on this living point within the eye itself a sense of vital personality. As for the motions of the eyeball, they are the work of invisible and extremely fragile steel springs on which it quivers, turns, or rests immobile, according to the instructions of the Android's central apparatus. Everything is inscribed there, in a single coordinated program, as I told you — the glance, the movement of the eyelids, the words, the gestures. You can no more see these operations from the outside than you can guess the *real* motives of a woman's sentimental glance from the impression it makes on you. Her skin, her beauty, her exterior charms soften the mechanisms and blend it into an idealized impression. Once the work of revision and correction has been checked out microscopically, well, upon my word, I challenge you, my lord, *to find a scruple more of that vital vacancy or void in the glance of Miss Alicia Clary than in that of her phantom!* And, what's more, the striking beauty of their eyes will be identical.



## CHAPTER XIV

## Hair

*A ribbon held her hair yet left it free.*

— Ovid

— As for hair, he went on, you understand that a practically perfect imitation is so easy, that we needn't dwell long on it.

We simply pick the counterpart hair carefully, perfume it with the various aromatic oils used by Miss Alicia Clary, add a volatilization of her personal perfume, and you'll never know the difference.

Still, in this matter I advise the use of artificial materials only with some restrictions. For the lashes, eyebrows, and so forth, it would be very convenient if Miss Clary would be good enough to present you with one of her own tresses, preferably of a darkish color. Nature has her rights, and on occasion, as you see, I am glad to respect them.

Thus, with the aid of a painstaking but essentially simple work of preparation, everything will be scrupulously imitated. The lashes will be counted and measured by a jeweler's loupe, in order to give special impact to the glance. The soft down, those ephemeral shadows about the snowy neck, like the finest shadings of Chinese ink on an ivory palette, those careless tendrils and the entire range of tints and shadings, in a word, will be reproduced with enchanting fidelity.

A few more details.

As for the nails, both of fingers and toes, upon my soul, no daughter of Eve will ever have possessed ones of better quality! Though exactly like those of your beautiful friend, they will have the glitter, the rosy glow of the living person — and they will be cut exactly like hers. You see already, I'm sure, that the difficulties here are too trifling for me even to bother explaining to you how I will overcome them.

Let's get on to the Epidermis, and be quick about it; we have barely twenty minutes to cover that topic.

— Do you realize, Edison, Lord Ewald said after a moment's silence, that it's really an infernal experience to see the details of Love in such a light?

— Not the details of Love, my lord, not at all, said Edison, looking solemnly on his friend. Only the details of "lovers." And, let me say it again: *since that's all they are* — why hesitate before them? Is a doctor upset by what lies on a dissecting table when he's giving an anatomy lesson?

Lord Ewald remained pensive.



## CHAPTER XV

## Epidermis

*I would love to drink from the cup of your hands*

*If the water would not melt the snow.*

— Tristan L'Hermite, *The Lovers' Walk*

— There it is! said Edison, pointing to a long cedar chest placed along the wall next to the flaming brazier. That's where I keep the perfect illusion of human skin. You felt it when you picked up that separate human hand which is upstairs on the table. I've told you about the extraordinary recent advances in photochromatic prints. Well, if the touch of this skin disturbs every living being, the texture of its invisible, opaline weaving is particularly receptive to impressions from sunlight; subjected to light, it sometimes becomes radiant, like the complexion of a young girl.

Notice also that here the difficulties of getting heliochromic coloration are much less than when we deal with a landscape, for example. In fact the complexion of our Caucasian race makes use of only two subtly graduated colors, of which we have fairly good technical command; they are pale white and rose.

Our colored projectors, then, imprint on this mock skin (once it has been securely fastened to the fully formed flesh) the exact tints of the nudity being reproduced. At that point it is the satiny quality of this yielding substance, elastic and subtle as it is, which serves to give vitality, after a manner of speaking, to the results already obtained. The result confuses completely the senses of Humanity: it becomes utterly impossible to distinguish the copy from the original. What we have is *Nature and nothing else*; neither more nor less, neither better nor worse, but Identity. The phantom, however, is unchanging. Having taken in the image of the living woman member by member, angle by angle, through every slightest profile front and back, the new structure retains everything so well that, if not destroyed by violence, it will outlast anyone who has seen it.

And now, my lord, said Edison with a glance at Lord Ewald, would you like me to show you a fabric woven of this ideal skin? Shall I explain to you the various ingredients of which it's compounded?



## CHAPTER XVI

## The Hour Strikes

*Mephistopheles: The hands are on the very stroke!*

*It's just about to sound! The hour sounds!*

— Goethe, *Faust*

— What's the point? said Lord Ewald, rising. No, I don't want to see this final gesture of the promised vision without seeing the vision itself. There's no way to isolate any particular element in such a work; and I don't like to be in the position of smiling at a notion when I don't know what the total conception or the final result will be.

At the same time, everything I've seen is too remarkable and too simple to discourage me from taking such part as I can in the unknown adventure that, you say, is to develop from it all. You have proven yourself sure of your Android, to the point of daring to face that laughter which is sure to greet explanations so detailed and so hostile to every illusion. Well, now it's my turn to declare myself satisfied, and to wait the prescribed time before passing judgment on your work. But I'm also bound to say that, as of today, the venture in question *doesn't seem to me* as absurd as it did at the first moment; that's all I can say at this time, and all I ought to say.

The engineer's reply was calm.

— I would expect nothing less of the high intelligence you have displayed this evening, my lord. No doubt I could spring a surprise or two on some of those modern wits who divert themselves by denying my work before having seen it and by accusing me of cynicism without having understood me. Indeed I could! Might I not address something like these words to them — without much fear of refutation?

You pretend that it is impossible to prefer before a living woman the Android of this woman? That no man would undertake to sacrifice himself or his beliefs or his human loves for an inanimate object? You think there's no way a man could mistake for a soul the vapor that rises from a battery?

But — these are words that you have lost the right to speak. Because of the steam generated in a boiler, you have repudiated all the beliefs that thousands of heroes, thinkers, and martyrs bequeathed you over more than six thousand years — you who have no sense of time beyond an eternal *Tomorrow* on which the sun very likely will never rise. What is this thing to which, since yesterday, you have chosen to sacrifice



all the once immutable principles of those who preceded you on the planet — kings, gods, families, countries? It is this bit of steam, which whistles as it carries them off and dissipates them, at the wind's whim, among all the furrows of the earth, among all the waves of the sea! In twenty-five years, twenty-five million locomotive puffs have been able to plunge your 'enlightened souls' into utter disbelief of everything that was the true faith of Humanity for more than six thousand years.

You must allow me to feel some mistrust of all this sudden insight claimed by a group of people who have a pretty long record of being deceived in the past. If a little puff of steam, which began in the famous boiler of Papin, has been able to darken and disturb your love, and even your idea, of God — has served to destroy so many immortal, sublime, and innate hopes, so many ancient, fundamental, and legitimate hopes — why should I take with the slightest seriousness your pretended protestations, your knowing renegade smiles, your pious moral pretenses, which your life refutes every single day?

I have come with this message: Since our gods and our aspirations are no longer anything but *scientific*, why shouldn't our loves be so, too? In place of that Eve of the forgotten legend, the legend despised and discredited by Science, I offer you a scientific Eve — the only one, I think, now worthy of those blighted visceral organs which you still — by a kind of sentimentality that you're the first to mock — still call your "hearts." Far from being hostile to the love of men for their wives — who are so necessary to perpetuate the race (at least till the new order of things), I propose to reinforce, ensure, and guarantee that love. I will do so with the innocent aid of thousands and thousands of marvelous simulacra, in which all those beautiful but deceptive mistresses, ineffective henceforth forever, will be doubled in a second nature, rendered more perfect by Science. At the very least their healthful assistance will render less painful the miseries that — say what you will — always attend, sooner or later, your hypocritical marital lapses. In a word, I have come, I, the "Sorcerer of Menlo Park," as they call me here, to offer the human beings of these new and evolved times, to my scientific contemporaries as a matter of fact, something better than a false, mediocre, and ever-changing Reality; what I bring is a positive, enchanting, ever-faithful Illusion. If it's just one chimera for another, one sin against another sin, one phantasm against all the rest, *why not, then?* My lord, I swear to you that within one and twenty days, Hadaly will be in a position to challenge all Humanity to give a direct answer to that question. For if a society has elected to pursue some sort of hazy general welfare that lies forever in the future, a make-believe Justice which never takes form,



and a version of self-satisfaction that always remains miserable and childish; and if to achieve these values it denies what always before was called Penitence, Humility, Love, Faith, Prayer, the Ideal, and Hope for a condition beyond our lives of a single day — then I really must confess I don't see on what other diabolical principles modern man would dare present, without appearing ridiculous, a logical or serious objection.

Lord Ewald remained silent, gazing thoughtfully at this remarkable man whose bitter genius, alternately dark and sparkling, concealed beneath so many impenetrable veils *the real motive inspiring him*.

Abruptly a bell rang within a pillar; it was a signal from the earth's surface.

Hadaly rose slowly, like someone still a little drowsy.

— Here is the beautiful living lady, my lord Celian, she said. At this moment she is entering Menlo Park.

Edison looked at Lord Ewald with a fixed, inquiring expression.

— Farewell, Hadaly! the young man said gravely.

The inventor came over to shake hands with his disturbing creature.

— Until tomorrow and a new life! he said.

At these words all the fantastic birds of the underground groves and brightly lit and multicolored gardens, hummingbirds, parrots, turtle-doves, blue kingfishers, nightingales, and birds of paradise — even the solitary swan in the fountain where the snowy spray continued to fall — seemed to emerge from their hitherto silent spell.

— Good-bye, passing friend! Good-bye! they chorused in a medley of voices, some male, some female.

— Back to earth now, said Edison, putting on his fur coat.

Lord Ewald put on his own.

— I had arranged to have our visiting lady guided to the laboratory, said the electrician. We will be there to greet her.

Once on the elevator, he undid the heavy anchor cables; the doors of the magic tomb closed behind them.

Lord Ewald felt that he was returning, with his spiritual guide, to the land of the living.



## BOOK VI

... AND THERE WAS *SHADOW!*

## CHAPTER I

## Dinner with the Magician

*Now for the drinking, now for the light foot*

*Tripping fantastically!*

— Horace

A few moments later Edison and Lord Ewald were back in the laboratory under the glare of the arc lamps, tossing their furs onto an armchair.

— Here is Miss Alicia Clary! said the inventor, looking into a darkened corner of the long room beside the draperies of the window.

— Where? asked Lord Ewald.

— There, in that mirror, said the engineer in an undertone, pointing to a vast looking glass, dark as a stagnant lake by moonlight.

— I see nothing, said the other.

— It's a particular variety of looking glass, said Edison. And in a way it's not surprising that your fine lady appears to me in her reflection, since that's what I'm going to take from her. — Just a minute, he added, turning a screw that released the bolt of the door; Miss Clary is looking for the keyhole; she has found the crystal latch... and here she is.

The laboratory door opened; on the threshold appeared a tall and remarkably attractive young woman.

Miss Alicia Clary was dressed in a glittering silk dress of pale blue, which seemed sea green under the electric lights; she was wearing a red rose in her dark hair, and diamonds sparkled at her ears as well as amid the flowers of her corsage. A sable wrap was thrown over her shoulders, and a veil of English lace cast an exquisite shadow over her face.

The woman was stunning; a living evocation of the *Venus Victorious*. Even at first glance, her resemblance to the divine statue appeared so striking, so incontestable, as to give one an indefinable shock. Here was certainly the human original of that amazing photograph which four hours earlier had been projected on the wall screen.

She remained motionless as if surprised at the appearance of the room, strange and even more than strange, that now confronted her.

— Please come in, Miss Clary! My friend Lord Ewald has been ex-



pecting you with the most eager anticipation; and, if you'll allow me to say so, now that you are here, I see exactly why.

The young lady replied, with the intonation of a shopgirl in a department store, but in a voice of perfect clarity, a voice to make one think of golden hailstones ringing against a sonorous crystal globe.

— Sir, she said, I've come without any special preparations, just like an artist, you understand. As for you, my lord, your message really amazed me. I thought . . . I didn't know what to think, really I didn't!

She stepped forward.

— In whose house have I the honor of being? she asked, with a smile that was intended to be slightly sarcastic, but which nonetheless seemed like a gleam of starlight across a frozen steppe.

— In mine, said Edison briskly; I am Master Thomas.

At these words the smile of Miss Alicia grew even colder.

— Yes, Edison continued with an obsequious expression, Master Thomas. Surely you must have heard of me? Master Thomas, general impresario for all the great theaters of England and America!

She stirred with excitement, and the smile reappeared, much more radiant now, and this time tinged with the notion of self-interest.

— Oh, but . . . I'm delighted to meet you, sir! she stammered.

Then, turning to whisper to Lord Ewald, she hissed at him:

— What's this? Why didn't you warn me? I do thank you for the introduction, since I want to be famous, and that is the thing nowadays. But this meeting isn't regular or reasonable, it seems to me. I can't be looking like a bourgeoisie in the presence of people like this. But you, you've always got your head in the stars, my lord.

— Always, I'm afraid, said Lord Ewald, bowing stiffly as the young lady took off her hat and veil.

Edison had tugged at a metal ring hidden in the drapes; from the floor there suddenly rose up a magnificent candlelit table on which had been arranged a splendid evening supper.

It was like a stage setting, a supper prepared by fairies.

Three places were set in porcelain of Saxony; dishes of game and baskets of rare fruit stood beside them. Alongside the table was a serving cart holding half a dozen dusty wine bottles and various decanters of liqueur.

— My dear Mr. Thomas, said Lord Ewald, allow me to present Miss Alicia Clary, whose talents, both as a singer and as an actress, I have described to you.

Edison bowed respectfully.

— Ah, indeed! he said offhandedly. Well, I hope to be able to hasten



your debut, one of these days, in some of our principal theaters, Miss Clary. But we can talk of all that as we eat, don't you agree? I find travel is always good for the appetite, and the air at Menlo Park is a bit sharp at this season.

— It's true! I'm hungry! said the young lady, so simply and naturally that Edison, duped by the magical smile she had forgotten to wipe from her face, was taken aback and looked at Lord Ewald in amazement. He had, in fact, taken this charming and unaffected expression as an access of pure girlish enthusiasm. What could it possibly mean? If this sublime incarnation of beauty could say *in that way* just that she was hungry, Lord Ewald must have been mistaken, since this single lively, unforced note proved that she had a heart and a soul.

But the young lord, like a man who knows the precise value of everything that is said around him, never changed his expression. And in a moment Miss Alicia, feeling that she had said something too trivial before these "artist types," hastened to add with a simper, intended to be witty and subtle, but which gave an expression of comic sacrilege to her magnificent features:

— *Well, it's not very POETIC, gentlemen; but we have to keep our feet on the ground, sometimes.*

At this word, which fell with the weight of a tombstone on the adorable creature who, without knowing what she was doing, had thus so totally and hopelessly betrayed herself — at this fatal word, which only a God can forgive and wash in the blood of His redemption, Edison's brow cleared. Lord Ewald's analysis had been exact.

— Charming! he cried, with an air of cordial good fellowship. You're absolutely right, my dear lady!

And so saying, he led his guests to table with a gracious gesture of invitation.

The blue dress of Miss Alicia, as it brushed over some batteries standing by, drew from them several sparks which were lost in the upper lighting of the room.

They took their seats. A bouquet of tea rose buds, placed as if by elves, indicated the young lady's place.

— I can't say how much I should be in your debt, sir, said she, once seated and taking off her gloves, if through your agency I could have a serious debut in London, for example . . .

— Oh! replied Edison, but isn't it a pleasure almost divine, to launch a star on her career?

— I should tell you, my dear sir, Miss Alicia Clary interrupted, that I've already sung before some of the crowned heads . . .



—...a diva! cried Edison, enthusiastically, pouring out a bit of fine burgundy for his guests.

— Well, now, sir, said Miss Alicia, in a manner at once peevish and ingratiating, everybody knows that *divas* tend to be rather less than respectable in their habits; I shouldn't want to be thought like them in that respect. Actually, I would have preferred a more honorable existence, and my present career is one to which I have had to resign myself, because I see that it's essential to be of one's age! And besides, when one can take advantage of what one's got to make a good round fortune — however bizarre one's talents — well, I find that all trades are about the same nowadays.

The Lur-Saluces sauterne flowed, frothing over the tops of the glasses.

— Life makes its demands on us! said Edison. I myself have little natural taste for haggling with temperamental artists. Bah! The big organizations can adapt to all circumstances and make themselves masters of everything. You must resign yourself, therefore, to Glory, Miss Clary, as so many others have done — who expected it as little as you! To your triumphs!

And he raised his glass.

Charmed by the unpretentious palaver of Edison (whose face, in Lord Ewald's eyes, seemed hidden under a black velvet mask), Miss Clary touched her glass to Edison's with a gesture so lofty and reserved that within her miraculous hands the glass took on the appearance of a chalice.

They drank the liquid sunlight together; with that gesture, the ice seemed definitely to be broken.

And all around them, gleaming off the cylinders, the angles of the reflectors, and the great glass discs, the lamplight trembled. An impression of solemnity, secret and almost occult, rose above the exchanged glances of the diners. All three were pale; the great wing of Silence passed for a moment over them.



## CHAPTER II

## Suggestion

*The questions and answers passing between operator and subject are nothing but a verbal veil, without significance, beneath which — direct, fixed, undistracted — the will of the suggester should remain fixed like a sword directly on the eyes of the patient.*

— Modern physiology

And yet Miss Alicia Clary still smiled, and the diamonds on her fingers glittered every time she raised her golden fork to her lips.

Edison watched this woman with the keen glance of the entomologist who has discovered, after long searching, the fabulous night moth that is destined, tomorrow, to form the jewel of a museum collection with a silver pin in its back.

— By the way, Miss Clary, said he, tell me now: what do you think of our theater in this country, eh? The stage sets, the singers — they are pretty good, don't you think?

— One or two of them are fairly attractive, yes, if that's what you like — but most of them . . . what frights!

— Perfect! You're absolutely right! said Edison with a laugh. Those old-fashioned costumes were so ugly! And how did you like *Der Freischutz*?

— The tenor, you mean? she replied. His voice was a bit pale; he was a distinguished man, but cold, very cold.

— Always beware of the men a woman calls cold! said Edison under his breath to Lord Ewald.

— What did you say? asked Miss Alicia.

— I was saying that distinction is everything, absolutely everything in life.

— Yes, of course, distinction, said the young lady, raising her eyes, deep as oriental dawns, to the roof of the laboratory. I feel I could never possibly love anyone who wasn't distinguished.

— True, all the great men of history, Attila, Charlemagne, Napoleon, Dante, Moses, Homer, Mohammed, Cromwell, and so on were gifted with the most exquisite distinction, or so History tells us. Such manners they had . . . such delicate charm . . . which they sometimes pushed to the point of coyness! And that of course is why they were so successful. — But, in fact, I was talking about the opera.

— Oh, the opera! Miss Clary said, with a pout as delicately disdain-



ful as that of Venus glancing at Juno and Diana. Well, just between us, it seemed to me just a little . . .

— It is, isn't it? said Edison, arching his brows and speaking without the slightest inflection — it is just a little . . .

— Just so, said the actress, holding in both hands her tea roses and breathing them in.

— Well, in a word, it's not really up to date! said Edison in a dry and peremptory tone.

— Besides, Miss Alicia added, I don't like their shooting off guns on the stage. It startles the audience. And this opera starts with three gunshots. It's noise, not art!

— And then the action starts right away! said Edison, lending her support. The whole piece would be improved by cutting out those gunshots.

— Actually that whole opera, Miss Alicia Clary murmured, is nothing but a piece of *fantasy*, and all that sort of thing.

— And fantasy has had its day! You're absolutely right! We live in an age when only the *factual* has a claim on our attention. The fantastic doesn't exist for us! As for the music, didn't you think it rather . . . well, sort of blah, right?

And he twisted his lips in a derogatory sneer.

— Well, of course I left before the waltz! said the young lady, as if that circumstance left her in no position to judge.

And her voice pronounced this sentence in contralto tones so rich and pure, so celestial even, that in the hearing of a foreigner who did not speak English, Miss Alicia Clary, with her Greek features, would have seemed some sublime phantom of Hypatia, wandering by night across the Holy Land and reading by moonlight on the ruins of Sion some forgotten passage of the Song of Songs.

Lord Ewald, oblivious to their conversation, seemed completely engrossed by the iridescent sparkles reflected in the vermilion liquid of his wineglass.

— That's different, of course, said Edison, without emotion. I understand, naturally, that you couldn't form an opinion on fragments — like the Forest Scenes, for example, or the Melting of the Bullets, or even on a *little bit*, like the Calm of the Night . . .

— That is part of my repertoire, sighed Miss Clary; but that soprano in New York was wasted on the part. I could sing it ten times over without putting as much effort into it as she did. You recall, don't you, the beautiful virtuoso added, turning to Lord Ewald, that night when I sang *Casta Diva* for you? I really don't understand how people can listen seri-



ously to singers who "get all wrapped up" in the part, as we say. I think I'm in the middle of a crowd of madmen when I see absurdities like that being applauded.

— Ah, how well I understand you, Miss Alicia! cried the inventor.

Abruptly he paused.

He had just noted a glance that Lord Ewald, in a moment of gloomy distraction, cast on the rings worn by the young lady; and he understood instantly that his friend was thinking of Hadaly.

— But now, Edison resumed, raising his head, it seems to me that we are omitting a rather important topic.

— What's that? asked Miss Clary.

And she turned smilingly toward Lord Ewald, as if surprised by the silence he was preserving.

— It's the matter of the basic salary and special bonuses that you'll be wanting.

— Oh, she said, hastily turning her attention from the young lord; that's something I hadn't considered. I'm not a woman who thinks much of money.

— Like all hearts of gold! Edison replied gallantly, making a slight bow.

— Still, one needs to think about it, murmured the incomparable creature, with a sigh that a poet would not have hesitated to give to Desdemona.

— What a shame! cried Edison. Oh, bah! One needs so little *when one is a true artist*.

This time the compliment seemed to make little impression on Miss Clary.

— On the other hand, she said, a great artist is judged by the money she can command. I'm far richer now than my natural inclinations call for; but I really would like to owe my fortune to my trade — to my art, I should say.

— It's an admirable delicacy of sentiment, Edison replied.

— Yes, she replied, and if I could earn, for example . . . (she hesitated and looked at the engineer) . . . twelve thousand . . .

Edison frowned slightly.

— Or six? Miss Clary hastily added.

Edison's face cleared up a bit.

— Well, anywhere from five to twenty thousand dollars a year, Miss Clary finished, feeling bolder. And, with the smile of the divine Anadyomene lighting up her face, she seemed to suggest the goddess herself rising from the waves. — Well, with a sum like that, I really could



feel quite content . . . because of the *glory*, you understand.

Edison's face also lit up.

— What modesty! he cried. I imagined that you were anticipating that many guineas!

A shadow, as of disappointment, fled across the sublime brow of the young lady.

— Well, you understand, at the beginning, she said. One shouldn't be greedy then.

Edison's face darkened once more.

— But you understand, my motto is "Everything for Art!" Miss Clary hastened to conclude.

Edison extended both hands.

— I recognize in you the disinterested devotion of a great soul! he said. But I shall not pursue the point; no premature flatteries. What could be a worse insult than excessive adulation? We shall wait a bit. Meanwhile, would you like a sip of this Canary wine?

Suddenly, as if just awakening, the young woman began to look about her.

— But . . . where am I? she asked.

— This is the studio, said Edison solemnly, of the most original, most distinguished sculptor in the United States. She is a woman. No doubt that alone will recall to you her illustrious name. She is Mrs. Any Sowana. I have rented to her this part of my estate.

— Remarkable! . . . I saw in Italy the workshops of several sculptors, and their instruments weren't anything like these.

— Ah, well, I shouldn't be surprised, said Edison; these are the new techniques. Everything is done much more quickly these days; it's a matter of simplifying the old processes . . . But haven't you ever heard of Any Sowana, the great artist who works here?

— Yes, I think so, I must have . . . said Miss Alicia uncertainly.

— I was sure you would have, Edison continued; her reputation has crossed the oceans. She is not only a supreme artist in marble and alabaster, but the speed of her execution is literally prodigious! She makes use of hitherto-unknown techniques, of all the most recent discoveries. In three weeks she can reproduce magnificently, and with an exactness that's positively uncanny, any sort of figure, animal or human. And, by the way, Miss Clary, you must be aware that nowadays, among all the best people, portraits are being replaced by statues. Marble is in fashion. The most distinguished ladies in society and in the arts have sensed, by way of their feminine tact, that the dignity and beauty of their physical presences could never be *shocking*. Mrs. Any Sowana is not here



tonight because she is in New York, putting the finishing touches on a statue of the Queen of Otaheite, who happened to be in town.

— Is that so? said Miss Clary, much astonished. Then this has become respectable in good society?

— And of course in the world of the arts as well! said Edison. Do you mean to say you haven't seen the statues of Rachel, of Jenny Lind, of Lola Montes?

Miss Clary seemed to be searching the recesses of her memory.

— I really must have seen them . . . she said.

— And that of Princess Borghese?

— Ah, of course! That I remember well, I saw it *in Spain*, I think; yes, it was in Florence, Miss Alicia Clary said thoughtfully.

— Ah, well, with a princess setting the example, Edison said offhandedly, you understand that the thing has become completely a matter of course. Not even queens object any longer. When a great artist is endowed with extraordinary beauty, she owes it to herself to have a statue made . . . even before the public insists on putting it up! Your own, Miss Alicia, must often have graced the yearly exhibitions in London? How is it possible that I don't recall seeing it there? I should certainly recall seeing anything so strikingly attractive — but, I'm sorry to say, I don't.

Miss Clary looked downcast.

— No, she said, I have nothing but my bust in white marble and various photographs. I didn't realize that . . .

— Oh! cried Edison, but it's a crime against Humanity! And worse still, from the publicity point of view, which true artists always consider the primary one, it's a serious omission. I'm not at all surprised that you're not already listed among the stars whose name alone is worth a fortune to a theater and whose talent is priceless!

As he spoke these ridiculous words Edison discharged a blaze of light from his own calm, clear eyes, deep into the wide eyes of the young lady.

— It seems to me you should have told me about all this, my lord, said Alicia, turning to Lord Ewald.

— I did, in fact, take you to the Louvre, if you recall, Miss Alicia, said Lord Ewald.

— Ah, yes! To see that statue which resembles me, which has lost its arms! But if nobody knows that it's me, much good that does!

— A word of advice: Seize the opportunity that presents itself! Edison cried; and the full power of his magnetic gaze never left the two eyes of the beautiful young virtuoso.



— Well . . . if it's the style nowadays, I'd really like to, said Alicia.

— Done. And since time is golden, you can rehearse for me various scenes from a number of new dramatic productions that I have on foot, even as Mrs. Any Sowana (beg pardon — would you like a bit of this roast plover? white meat or dark?), aided by my advice, sets to work on a statue of you. She works so swiftly that in three weeks — well, you will see for yourself.

— Can we start tomorrow? cried the young lady. And how shall I pose? she asked, dipping her lovely rosy lips in the champagne glass.

— We have here a woman of spirit, said Edison; no silly quibblings and hesitations here! What we do must cast all our rivals in the shade, and make such an impression on the public that the echoes of it are heard on both continents!

— I ask nothing better, declared Miss Alicia. The main thing is success.

— From the publicity point of view, a full-sized marble statue of you is indispensable in the lobbies of Covent Garden and Drury Lane. Indispensable, I say! Because, as you understand, a magnificently beautiful statue of the singer predisposes the audience in your favor, sets the crowd to talking, attracts the interest of the directors. So you must pose as Eve; it's the most distinguished pose of all. No other artist, I dare say, will dare to take the role or sing the part, after you've made it yours, of *The Future Eve*.

— Dear Master Thomas, as Eve you say? It's a role, I take it, in the new repertoire I shall be practising?

— Naturally, said Edison. Perhaps, he added, smiling, the role will be brief, but it will be grand, and that's the main thing. And for a beauty as amazing as yours, it's really the only suitable role from every aspect.

— It's true, I'm very beautiful; and that's a fact! murmured Miss Clary, with a strange sort of melancholy.

Then she raised her head.

— What does Lord Ewald think of it? she asked.

— My friend Master Thomas has just given you some excellent advice, said Lord Ewald carelessly.

— I have indeed, said Edison quickly. And, in any case, the greatness of your art justifies the statue, while the beauty of your figure will disarm all criticism. Aren't the Three Graces to be found in the Vatican? Didn't Phryne overwhelm with her beauty the Areopagus? Surely if success in your profession demands it, Lord Ewald will not be so cruel as to stand in your way.

— So we're all agreed, said Alicia.

— We are indeed; we'll start tomorrow! When she gets back around



noon, I'll tell our immortal Sowana, so that she can come and get started with you. When would be convenient for you, Miss Alicia?

— About two o'clock, if that —

— Two o'clock! Excellent. And meanwhile, not a word of this whole enterprise! Edison added, a finger to his lips. If it got out that I'm taking a hand in your debut, I should be in the position of Orpheus among the Bacchantes; my other clients would tear me limb from limb.

— You needn't worry about that! cried Miss Alicia Clary.

Then she turned toward Lord Ewald.

— He's a very *serious* man, Master Thomas, she said to him in an undertone.

— Very serious indeed, said Lord Ewald; that is why my telegram was so urgent.

They had come to the dessert.

He glanced at Edison and noted that the inventor was scribbling a few calculations on the tablecloth.

— You're writing something? said Lord Ewald with a smile.

— Nothing, nothing, murmured the engineer. A notion that just came to me, which I want to be sure not to forget.

Just at that moment the glance of the young woman fell on the little glittering flower bestowed on Lord Ewald by Hadaly, which, no doubt by inadvertence, he still wore in his buttonhole.

— What's that? she said, putting down her glass of exotic liqueur and stretching out her hand.

At this question, Edison rose from the table and strolled over to open the great window looking out on the park. The moonlight was superb. He leaned against the railing, smoking, his back turned to the stars.

Lord Ewald shuddered at the living beauty's inquisitive gesture. An involuntary reaction to protect the strange flower had escaped from him.

— It's a beautiful make-believe flower, she said with a smile; isn't it for me?

— No, my dear; you are too real for it, the young man replied simply. Suddenly, in spite of himself, he closed his eyes.

There, on the steps of her magic alcove, Hadaly had just appeared. She pushed aside with her resplendent arm the draperies of deep red plush.

Motionless in her armor and under her black veil, she stood there like a vision.

Miss Alicia Clary, having her back turned in that direction, could not see the Android.

Hadaly had no doubt been present, and had overheard the last few



phrases of the conversation. From her fingertips she blew a silent kiss to Lord Ewald, who abruptly rose to his feet.

— What is it? What's the matter? cried the young woman. You frighten me!

He did not respond. She turned to look, but the draperies had closed, the apparition had disappeared.

Meanwhile, profiting by this momentary distraction of Miss Alicia's, the grand electrician had stretched forth his hand before the face of the frightened woman.

Softly, gradually, her lids closed over her lustrous eyes; her arms, as if petrified into Paros marble, remained motionless, one resting on the table, the other, still holding its bouquet of pale roses, resting on a cushion.

Like a statue of the Olympian Venus rigged out in modern dress, she seemed fixed in this attitude; and the beauty of her features, in this posture, seemed almost superhuman.

Lord Ewald, who had seen the gesture and the effect of magnetic sleep, took Alicia's hand, now suddenly cold.

— I've seen similar experiments many times, he said, but never one quite like this. You must have a great energy of nervous fluid and an amazing will...

— Nothing special, said Edison. We're all born with this vibrant faculty, though in different degrees; I've simply trained mine over the years, that's all. I will add that tomorrow, precisely at two o'clock, no human being will be able to prevent this woman (at least not without putting her in danger of death) from coming here to this stage and cooperating as best she can in the experiment on which we agreed. However, if you say just a single word now, there's still time: our entire project that we discussed this evening will be forgotten. You can talk as if we were alone; she will never hear us now.

During the moment of silence that followed this final challenge, the pale Android reappeared, pushing aside the dark heavy draperies, and remaining silent, motionless, and attentive behind her veil of mourning, her silver arms crossed over her breast.

Then the young lord, indicating the sleeping bourgeois beauty, replied:

— My dear Edison, you have my word already; and I assure you that when I make a commitment, I'm absolutely inflexible about keeping it.

Of course we both know only too well that within our species the extraordinary beings are few and far between; and when you subtract her physical beauty from this person beside us, she is exactly like millions and millions of others who share the same basic nature. And as



between them and their male counterparts, as far as mental imperception goes, there's practically nothing to choose.

As a matter of fact, I'm far from being excessive in my demands on the intellectual attainments of a woman, even a "superior woman." If this creature were simply gifted with the minimum traces of tenderness, sheer animal tenderness for any creature whatever, perhaps for a child, I should consider the plan devised between us a sacrilege.

But you've just been able to observe the endemic, incurable egotistic aridity that, along with her wearisome complacency, animates this supernatural shape. And it's become standard for us that her pitiful *self* can't love anything, because within its absurd, mulish entity there's no faculty for forming the only sentiment that can complete a real human being.

Her "heart," so called, can only grow steadily more sour in the atmosphere of dull boredom that her "ideas," so called, diffuse around her. In addition, they have the horrible property of infecting with their miasma everything she approaches, including her own beauty — at least in my eyes. You could destroy her life without stripping her of that deaf, opaque, petty, blinkered, pitiful mediocrity. She *is made that way*; and I don't know anyone except a God who at the solicitation of Faith might conceivably alter the inner nature of such a creature.

Why, then, do I choose to deliver myself, in fatal fashion if need be, from the love that her body has inspired in me? Why not simply content myself (as I'm sure the vast majority of my kind would do) with the exclusive enjoyment of her physical beauty, and pay no attention to *the spirit inhabiting it*?

Because I cannot by any process of reasoning erase from my conscience a secret inner certainty that is indelible, which harrows my whole being with unbearable remorse.

I feel, in heart, in body, in mind, that in every act of love one doesn't choose merely *the part that one desires*; that one betrays oneself by pretending to be able to exclude some part of the experience — just arbitrarily, and usually out of sensual cowardice. One cannot possibly exclude from the form with which one proposes to mingle one's own the very first principle that animates it and, alone, *is capable of producing that form and the desires surrounding it*: one MARRIES the entire creature. I say that every lover who tries to stifle this thought, which is an absolute part of his own self, and penetrates his being like a shadow, must be a liar; willy-nilly, he possesses the soul with the body, and cannot simply exclude it from the act of possession whenever the idea of it threatens to disturb his pleasure.



But I cannot, I tell you, banish this inner evidence that obsesses me, every instant of my daily life, this thought that my *self*, my inner being, has been contaminated with this clammy spirit, moved only by muddy instincts, incapable of eliciting beauty from anything. Since things are only as they are conceived, and we ourselves are only what we can admire in things (that is, *recognize* of ourselves in them) — I swear to you in all sincerity that I feel myself degraded, almost forever, by the mere act of having possessed this woman. Not knowing how to *redeem* myself from this deed, I want at least to punish my momentary weakness by a kind of purifying death. In a word, even though the whole human race should mock me for it, I insist on the peculiar privilege of TAKING MYSELF SERIOUSLY. My family motto is, after all, *Etiam si omnes, ego non*: though everyone else conforms, I don't.

Once more let me remind you, my dear enchanter, that if it were not for this abrupt, strange, and fantastic proposal that you have made me, I would not be here to listen, across the breezes of this pale morning, to the chime of that distant bell.

No, I was disgusted with Time and all its trappings, as you know.

Now that I have the right to view the ideal mortal veil of this woman as a kind of spoils gained in a combat I have won too late, and from which I emerge mortally wounded, I presume to sum up this evening, and dispose of this veil, in the following words: "Since the power of your prodigious mind may perhaps allow you to do so, I entrust to you the task of converting this pale human phantom into a mirage capable of working a wondrous change in me. And if in this work you deliver, for my sake, the sacred form of this body from the malady of this soul, I swear on my part to attempt — through the breath of a hope still strange to my heart — the completion of this life-giving, redemptive shadow."

— Very well, said Edison thoughtfully.

— It is sworn! added Hadaly, in her melodious, melancholy voice.

The draperies closed. Behind them a spark glittered momentarily; the dull rumble of the marble platform, sliding as if precipitously into the earth, was heard for a few seconds, then disappeared.

With two or three quick movements of his hand around the head of the sleeper, Edison restored her to her senses, while Lord Ewald put on his gloves as if nothing but the most commonplace events had occurred.

Awakening, Miss Alicia Clary resumed the conversation at the very point where hypnotic sleep had overtaken her, without the least recollection of the interval.

— ... and why don't you answer me, if you please, My Lord Count Ewald?



Hearing his title thus foolishly unfolded, Lord Ewald did not even condescend to that thin, bitter smile with which gentlemen of real nobility sometimes greet the pretentious patents assumed by common riffraff.

— You must excuse me, my dear Alicia, he said. I'm feeling a bit tired.

The window had remained open to the starry night, which was already growing pale in the east; an approaching carriage rattled over the gravel of the park walkways.

— I think this fellow has come to take you to your quarters, said Edison.

— It's really quite late, said Lord Ewald; and you must be sleepy, Alicia.

— It's true, I would like to *rest* for a while, said she.

— Here is the address of the house where you will spend the night, said Edison. The driver knows the way, and I've seen the apartment myself; it's quite satisfactory for travelers. I'll see you tomorrow, then, and meanwhile, good night.

And shortly the carriage was taking the two lovers through Menlo Park to their improvised quarters.

Alone, Edison meditated a moment, and then closed the window.

— What an evening! he murmured. And what a strange girl! For all his intelligence, that nice young lord simply doesn't see that her resemblance to the statue (and one can practically see the imprint of the stone in her flesh) that this resemblance, yes, is nothing but a *sickness*, it must be the result of some envious strain injected long ago in her bizarre family. She was born that way, as some children are born speckled or with web feet; in a word, she is an anomaly as odd as a giant! Her resemblance to the *Venus Victorious* is nothing for her but a kind of elephantiasis of which she will die. A pathological deformity, with which her wretched little nature is afflicted. No matter, what is strange is that this sublime monstrosity arrived in the world just in time to provide a complete legitimacy for my first Android. Come on, then; it's an elegant experiment, and there's work to be done! Let there be *Shadow*! And now I suspect I, too, have earned the right to a few hours' sleep.

Then, moving to the middle of the laboratory, he called aloud, speaking softly but with a peculiar intonation:

— Sowana!

In response the pure, grave, feminine voice that he had heard earlier, just as dusk was falling, replied from some invisible source in the middle of the room:

— Here I am, my dear Edison. Well! What did you think?



— Several times the results were enough to disturb even me, Sowana! Edison replied. Really and truly, it surpassed all our hopes. It's magic!

— Oh, it's really nothing yet! said the voice. *After the incarnation*, the effect will be supernatural.

— Wake up now, and get some rest! Edison murmured after a moment's silence.

He touched a button, and the three radiant lamps went out instantly.

Only the night light still burned on the ebony table, lighting up on the cushion beside it the mysterious arm with its bracelet entwined with the golden viper, whose blue eyes seemed fixed on the great electrician in the dark.

### CHAPTER III

## The Price of Fame

*The man who isn't ready to work twenty-five hours a day  
has no place in my shop.*

— Edison

For two weeks after that evening, the sun continued to shine cheerily on this favored district of New Jersey. Autumn advanced toward winter; the leaves of the great maple trees around Menlo Park turned red and gold, and each successive dawn found them a little drier, a little fewer in number.

Already Edison's house and gardens sank in darker and earlier shadows. The birds of the area, though still flitting through the bare branches and sparse foliage, fluffed up their plumage against the cold, began to tune their winter songs.

Throughout this Indian summer, the United States in general, and Boston, New York, and Philadelphia in particular, were disturbed by rumors that Edison had canceled all his appointments since the visit of Lord Ewald.

Locked in his laboratory with his mechanics and assistants, he no longer appeared in public. The reporters, sent out on urgent assignment, found the doors closed in their faces; they tried to pump Mr. Martin, but he smiled and said absolutely nothing — which was frustrating. The newspapers and magazines were full of questions. "What was the Sorcerer of Menlo Park, the Papa of the Phonograph, up to now?" A number of rumors began to circulate that the cash register (!) had at last been successfully adapted to work by Electricity.



Some smart snoopers tried to rent rooms with windows overlooking the laboratory, in the hope of catching a glimpse of an experiment. Dollars squandered in vain! Nothing whatever to be seen out of those cursed windows! The Gas Company, much distressed by the news, sent out spies who were posted on the nearby hillsides, from which, with enormous telescopes, they inspected and reinspected every inch of the gardens till their eyes ached.

But in the direction of the laboratory a thick grove of trees obstructed their vision. All they were able to see was a very handsome young lady dressed in blue silk, strolling across the lawn and pausing occasionally to pluck a flower from the gardens. This report from their agents terrified the Gas Company.

"— The engineer was trying to put them off the track — It was perfectly clear. — A young lady picking flowers? . . . That was the limit! — Dressed in blue silk? . . . No doubt about it! . . . He was making fun of them! He had discovered a way to split Fluid, the demon! — But they wouldn't let him pull the wool over their eyes. — A man like that was a danger to society. — They would talk with their lawyers! — There was no need for him to think!" And so on.

The excitement was mounting to its height when word began to circulate that Edison had sent in haste for the excellent Doctor Samuelson, D.D.S., and the famous W. Pejor, the preferred dentist of American high society, a practitioner famous alike for the delicacy and solidity of his bridgework, and for an innocent tendency to rape his patients.

Immediately the rumor began to spread — a thousand lightning flashes could not have carried it faster — that Edison was sick, he was moaning with pain day and night, he was suffering from frightful inflammations and shooting pains, so that his entire head, swollen by a hideous attack of meningitis, had become as big as the capitol building in Washington.

A paroxysm of the cerebellum was certainly to be feared. In any case, it was all up with him; he had had it! The stockholders in the Gas Company, whose shares had recently lost a good deal of their value, were overwhelmed with joy at this good news. They flung themselves into one another's arm, wept with delighted relief, and babbled absolute nonsense to one another.

After exhausting themselves with fruitless efforts to come up with an adequate celebration, from concerts and picnics to hymns of thanksgiving, eventually renounced by common accord, they were all struck with the same luminous idea and rushed off in haste to buy, at newly reduced rates, shares in the Society to Exploit the Intellectual Capital of Edison.



But then Doctor Samuelson, D.D.S., and his colleague the illustrious W. Pejor returned to New York and affirmed on their honor that the health of the miraculous sorcerer had never been better, and that during their visit at Menlo Park they had simply been working with the young lady in the blue dress who was helping Edison in some of his experiments with anesthetics. At once the stock market plunged, several million dollars were lost, which caused yesterday's buyers to moan in despair. At a stockholders' meeting held in response to the infamous crash, three official groans were voted against the engineer — and carried out on the spot! In a country where everyone's attention is riveted on industrial activity and the exploitation of inventions, nothing is more natural than incidents like these.

Still, when the panic had partially subsided and the alerts had been called off, most people felt a little reassured, and the quantity of espionage diminished a trifle.

However, one fine night it became known that a good-sized chest had been shipped to Edison from New York; and then, as the wagon arrived in Menlo Park, some informal guards who had been posted by the roadside gave evidence of unanticipated moderation. Indeed, the techniques they employed on this occasion to find out what was going on were widely condemned as being far too half-hearted and indecisive.

In fact, they limited themselves to falling on the driver and the Negro workmen who were escorting the chest; without any idle preliminaries they beat them insensible with clubs and left them for dead on the road. Then by the light of their torches they put themselves to open, with all the subtlety and delicacy of thought available to them, the mysterious chest. That is, they used cold chisels and sledge hammers to smash the hinges.

At last it was open, and they were free to examine the new electric components of the intricate "cash register" evidently ordered by Edison.

The leader of the expedition, having made a minute inventory of the contents of the chest, found in it nothing but a new dress of blue silk, yes, absolutely new; a pair of lady's shoes of the same shade; some stockings, extremely sheer, a box of perfumed gloves, an intricately carved ebony fan, various pieces of black lace, a ravishingly light corset with flaming red ribbons, gauzy nightgowns, a box of jewels containing various diamond rings, pendants, and a bracelet, sundry vials of perfume, numerous handkerchiefs embroidered with the initial H, and various other objects of this general nature. It was a complete feminine wardrobe.

At this discouraging sight our agents, feeling distinctly stunned,



formed a circle around the chest, but as a result of a warning glance from their leader they left every object in its place. After duly placing their chins in their hands, our gentlemen indulged in several grimaces: their exploit had left them, no doubt, with a bitter aftertaste. At a complete loss, they crossed their arms, or slapped their big ruddy hands against their thighs, or raised their glances to the heavens, looking uneasily at one another out of the corners of their eyes. Then, half-stifled by the smoke from their torches, they began asking one another in mumbled undertones, and with a variety of choice expressions from the swill pail of their language, if in fact "the Papa of the Phonograph wasn't *playing a trick* on them."

Still, as their little prank might have dangerous consequences, the leader took a deep breath, gulped down his saliva, and issued his orders, helping them along with several of those choice imprecations which are so effective in conveying to a gang of barbarians an instant sense of reality. What he told them was to convey the *corpus delicti* with the well-known speed of light straight to its destination if they didn't want to be lynched on the spot.

The horde promptly set forth, stretching their legs to make good time. Having reached the gate of Edison, they were welcomed by Mr. Martin and his four merry men, who with glad smiles on their faces and revolvers in their hands thanked them warmly for all the trouble they had been good enough to take, assumed possession of the chest, and closed the gate on the noses of these gentlemen. As they stood gaping, they were blinded by a tremendous flash of magnesium, set off from the electrician's laboratory which, in its light, photographed all their hirsute, hispid, hyrcanian mugs.

Some compensation for their troubles was due them, so next morning a highly circumstantial telegram was dispatched by Edison, accompanied by a group portrait of the entire gang (flash photo taken in front of his gate). Duly summoned by the constable, whom they made haste to obey, the worthy group was rewarded with a couple of months in a cool, shady place. In fact, their employers, who had assigned them to the task, made haste to charge them most grievously before the constable, so deep was their solicitude for the disturbances caused to Edison. All these doings aroused more and more the excitement of public curiosity.

What was Edison doing? What could he have dreamed up this time? Some impatient souls dreamed of picking the lock on the gate! But the engineer had long ago issued a warning, by way of a public notice in the papers, that after dark various parts of his establishment, properly



insulated from the ground, would be charged with a strong electric current. (Anyone closing such a circuit would get his own personal KEEP OUT message inscribed unforgettably on his nervous system.) What watchmen, what guards, what lookouts can compare with electricity? Imagine trying to bribe it — above all, when one doesn't even know where it is! Unless one armed oneself with lightning rods, or wore thick porcelain clothing, any attempt at evasion would lead to unfortunate (not to say, clinical) consequences.

The gossip continued to spill forth. — “What do you suppose he's doing? What new combinations is he trying to make? — Shall we try asking Mrs. Edison? — You'd get a lot out of her! — Well, perhaps we could go at it indirectly. Maybe she knows something else. — How about the children? Not a chance there; trained from earliest youth to answer nosy questions by pretending to be deaf, they'd be a waste of time.” And so, finally, it all came down to this conclusion: they would just have to wait.

Just about this time Sitting Bull, sachem of the last major tribe of Indians, created a major disturbance by winning an unexpected and bloody victory over the American army troops sent against him. As everyone has heard, he killed and scalped a great many young men from the eastern part of the country, and this event, widely reported throughout the world, focused public attention for a while on the Indians, so that Edison was left for a few days in peace.

The engineer profited from this respite by sending one of his technicians to Washington, where the most distinguished hairdresser and wigmaker in the country was to be found. With this messenger Edison forwarded a lock of long, wavy brown hair, with a note indicating to the last milligram and millimeter the weight and length of the tresses he wanted to duplicate as exactly as possible. The whole parcel was accompanied by four life-size photographs of a masked head, whose hair and hair styling were to be reproduced.

Since the orders came from Edison, in less than two hours the hair had been arranged, weighed, measured, and fully prepared.

The messenger then handed to the artist a delicate layer of tissue, a piece of skin tissue so living in its appearance that for some time the hairdresser turned it over several times in his hands before crying:

— But this is a scalp! It's the top of someone's head, newly removed, tanned by some process I've never seen before! It's staggering! Unless, perhaps, it's some new substance which . . . In fact, all the *hardness* of the wig is removed by this process!

— Now listen here, replied the messenger, this is made to fit pre-



cisely on the head, forehead, and temples of a lady in the very highest ranks of society. As a result of a bad fever, she has lost most of her hair, and she wants to replace it for a while with this. These are the perfumes and oils that she uses. What we want you to create is a masterpiece — never mind about the price. Get together, then, with three or four of your best workmen, night and day if you must, until you've fastened this hair into this tissue in a way that would fool nature. One thing to be careful of — don't try to OUTDO Nature!!! That would be quite beside the point! *Identical*, nothing more. You will have to use magnifying glasses and compare your work constantly with the photographs, in order to reproduce the soft shadings of down, the little rebellious curls, the exact pattern of light and shade. Mr. Edison expects to receive your work in just three days — and I shan't leave here without it.

The hairdresser naturally received the announcement of this deadline with cries of protest; but on the evening of the fourth day the messenger, holding the box in his hand, passed through the gates of Menlo Park.

Now those in the neighborhood who were well informed began to whisper to one another about a certain mysterious carriage that arrived every morning at a secret gate newly cut in the wall surrounding Edison's estate. A young lady, almost always dressed in blue, and extremely beautiful, of most distinguished appearance, was always the only passenger. She alighted and passed the day with Edison and his helpers in the laboratory; occasionally she wandered in the gardens. Every evening the same carriage arrived to pick her up and took her off to a luxurious cottage recently rented by a young English lord — superbly handsome, as everyone agreed. — "What was the point of all this secrecy surrounding such trivial events? — Why this sudden withdrawal from the world? . . . Why all these *romantic* episodes in the world of Science? — At bottom, it wasn't, it couldn't be, serious! — Ah, what a strange man he was, that Edison! Eccentric, yes, that's what he was! Eccentric was exactly the right word for him!"

And from sheer weariness, people settled back to wait till the great engineer had recovered from his "frenzy."



## CHAPTER IV

## A Night of Eclipse

*But one autumnal evening, when the winds lay still in heaven, my beloved called me to her bedside. There was a dim mist over all the earth, and a warm glow upon the waters, and amid the rich October leaves of the forest, a rainbow from the firmament had surely fallen.*

*"It is a day of days," she said, as I approached; "a day of all days either to live or to die. It is a fair day for the sons of earth and life — ah, more fair for the daughters of heaven and death."*

— Edgar Allan Poe, *Morella*

On one of the last evenings of the third week, as dusk was falling, Lord Ewald dismounted from his horse before Edison's gate, had himself announced, and walked down the garden pathway leading to the laboratory.

Ten minutes previously, as he was reading the newspaper and awaiting the return home of Miss Alicia Clary, the young man had received the following telegram:

**"MENLO PARK: LORD EWALD AUG. 7, 5:22 P.M.: MY LORD, CAN YOU SPARE ME A FEW MOMENTS? — HADALY."**

Instantly Lord Ewald gave orders to have his gelding saddled.

The sun was setting after a stormy day; one might have thought that nature was in sympathy with the expected event. Edison had chosen his time well.

It was the dusk of a day of eclipse. To the west, the rays of the aurora borealis spread across the gigantic sky the ribs of their sinister fan. The horizon looked like a stage setting; the air moved heavily beneath the gusts of a warm breeze which tossed the heaps of fallen leaves. From the south far into the northwest stretched long lines of monstrous clouds like so many bundles of violet wadding edged in gold. The sky itself seemed artificial; above the hills to the north, long, low streaks of light from the dying sun stretched out across the sky like livid sword slashes; behind them, the piled-up clouds cast dark and threatening shadows across the earth.

As the young man cast his eyes up to the heavens, they seemed to him at that moment the exact reflection of his thoughts. At the end of the walkway and on the threshold of the laboratory, he hesitated a moment; then, through the window, he saw Miss Alicia Clary. It was



her last sitting; no doubt she was reciting one of her parts for Master Thomas. He entered.

Edison was seated quietly in his armchair, wearing a smoking gown, and holding some manuscripts on his knee.

At the sound of the opening door, Miss Clary turned sharply.

— My goodness, she cried, it's Lord Ewald!

As a matter of fact, since the terrible evening, the young man had made a point of not visiting the laboratory.

Edison rose to greet the elegant young man, who advanced toward him with a cool but sympathetic expression on his face. They shook hands.

— The telegram I received just now was so eloquent in its concision, that for the first time in my life I put on my gloves while already on horseback, said Lord Ewald.

Then, turning toward Alicia:

— Your hand, my dear! he added. You were rehearsing, I believe?

— Yes, she replied, but we're just about finished now. We were just working over a last passage or two.

Edison and Lord Ewald stepped aside several paces and conversed in undertones.

— Well, said the young man, the Great Work, the electric Ideal — our marvel, or rather yours — has it entered the world?

— Yes, Edison replied bluntly, she has. You will see her after Miss Alicia leaves. Take her away, my lord; arrange for us to be alone together.

— Already! said Lord Ewald thoughtfully.

— I kept my word, that's all, said Edison casually.

— And Alicia has no suspicions?

— A simple terra-cotta model has kept her on the wrong track, just as I said it would. Hadaly was hidden behind the impenetrable screen of my cameras, and Mrs. Any Sowana showed herself an artist of genius.

— How about your assistants?

— They saw nothing in the whole operation but an experiment in photosculpture; I kept everything else secret from them. Besides, I only set the inner mechanism in motion and started the breathing process this morning. The sun was just rising, and it promptly went into eclipse out of astonishment, added Edison laughingly.

— I must say that I feel some eagerness to see Hadaly, now that she's *become herself*! Lord Ewald murmured after a moment.

— Oh, you will see her tonight. But you won't recognize her, said Edison. And, by the way, I should warn you, the actuality is more terrifying than I thought it would be.



— Come now, gentlemen, cried Miss Clary, what's the conspiracy that you're whispering about?

— My dear lady, said Edison, returning to her, I was just telling Lord Ewald of my absolute delight with your training, your talent, and the magnificent voice you've been granted; and I added that I had the very highest hopes as to the future that awaits you very soon indeed.

— Very well! But you might easily have said all that out loud, Master Thomas, Miss Alicia exclaimed. There's nothing in *that* to offend anybody. But, she continued, brightening her words with a smile and the mock menace of a finger, I have a bone to pick with Lord Ewald myself — I'm not at all sorry he's come here. Yes, yes, I've had a few ideas of my own about what's been going on around me for these last three weeks! In a word, I've something on my mind! You gave me something to think about today, something you said that was very surprising, a real enigma...

And she added, in a manner that she intended to be dry and lofty but belied her grave and thoughtful beauty:

— Will you allow us to take a stroll in the park, Lord Ewald and myself? There's a particular matter that I have to clear up with him...

— Very well, said Lord Ewald, rather crossly, after exchanging a glance with Edison; but, he added, I too have some things to discuss with Master Thomas this evening, and his time is precious.

— Oh, we won't be long! cried Alicia. Come, now; I simply can't talk about this in front of him.

Miss Alicia Clary took her lover by the arm. They passed through the doorway and a moment later were strolling toward the somber pathway.

Lord Ewald, in a fever of impatience, was thinking of the enchanted caverns where, within an hour, he would be facing a new Eve.

But immediately after the departure of the two young people Edison's face took on an expression of deep concern and uneasiness. The engineer seemed to be afraid that, in her foolishness, Miss Clary might draw her lover into an untimely confidence; he drew aside the curtains before the window and stood watching them narrowly as they walked into the darkness.

Then he stepped briskly to a table on which rested a pair of marine binoculars, a microphone of a new design, and an electric rheostat. The wires of these two last instruments passed through the walls and stretched away to lose themselves in an electronic network that covered every part of the avenue, stretching from one tree to another on both sides.

He was evidently anticipating a scene of quarrel and perhaps breakup, which *he was bound to hear before presenting Hadaly*.



— What was it you wanted to tell me, Alicia? asked Lord Ewald.

— Not just now, please, she replied; let's wait till we're on the pathway. It's darker there, my dear, and we can't be seen. The problem is an obscure worry that occurred to me today, for the first time in my life; I'll explain it in just a moment.

— Just as you please, Lord Ewald replied.

The evening was still troubled; long lines of glowing fires from the aurora borealis stretched across the horizon; a few early stars dotted the dark blue intervals of sky between the clouds; above their heads as they strolled down the avenue, the dry leaves rustled; borne on a soft breeze, the odor of the flowers and grass was fresh, moist, and delicious.

— How beautiful it is tonight! said Miss Alicia with a little shiver.

Lord Ewald, preoccupied, hardly heard her.

— Yes, he said in a constrained tone that was tinged with bitterness and almost derisive; but tell me, Alicia, what have you got to say to me?

— My dear lord, what a hurry you're in this evening! Won't you come over here and sit on this mossy bench with me? We can talk better, and in any case I'm feeling a little tired.

She leaned on his arm as they walked to the bench.

— You're not feeling ill, Alicia? he asked.

She gave no answer.

It was very curious, but she too seemed to have a lot on her mind this evening.

Was it perhaps some feminine instinct, warning her of a vague danger ahead?

He did not know what to make of the young woman's hesitation. She twisted the stem of a flower, culled at random, and her entire being seemed to glow with a transcendent beauty. Her silken gown brushed the flowers of the lawn; she bent her dazzling features toward the shoulder of Lord Ewald, and the charm of her lovely tresses, flowing loosely under her mantilla of black lace, was both melancholy and intoxicating.

When they reached the bench, she sat down first. Lord Ewald, long accustomed to hearing her mouth platitudes either inane or selfish, waited patiently for her to produce some new specimens.

And yet, another idea danced before him: perhaps the powerful words of this magician Edison had managed to dissolve somewhat the layer of wax obscuring the sullen spirit of this still lovely creature. After all, she was keeping her mouth shut; and that was already a good deal.

He sat down beside her.

— My friend, she said suddenly, it seems to me that you've been sad for the last few days. Haven't you something to tell me yourself?



I may be more your friend than you imagine.

At that moment Lord Ewald's thoughts were a thousand miles from Miss Alicia Clary; he was dreaming of the strange flowers in that secret bower where Hadaly was even now waiting for him. And so when he heard the young woman's question, he was made profoundly uneasy by the thought that perhaps Edison had betrayed their secret!

But after a moment he ruled out that possibility. No — even on that first night, Edison had taken command of her too masterfully, had plied her with too many sarcasms, most of which had passed over her head. And besides, he had had too much time to listen to her since, ever to be deluded by these childish hopes of improving her moral character.

And yet he was surprised by this gentle expression of concern for his feelings. It was the first generous impulse he had noted in Alicia; her instincts must surely have been aroused by the sense of something grave about to take place...

A much more reasonable and much simpler notion replaced these first suspicions.

The poet was roused within him. He considered that the evening scene on every side of them was one of those in which it's hard for two human beings, in the glow of youth, beauty, and love, not to feel themselves lifted out of this world. He reminded himself that the mysteries of the feminine soul lie far beyond the reach of reason; that the most clouded hearts, subjected to sublime and serene influences, can grow instantly radiant with a light previously unknown to them. He reflected that such a hopeful development would be encouraged by the fostering influence of this quiet and shadowy twilight; and, finally, he thought that his wretched mistress, even if not consciously aware of these heavenly promptings, might yet be subject to their unconscious influence. Well, then, on this night of all nights, it was up to him to make a supreme effort at resurrecting the soul — hitherto deaf and blind, still-born, so to speak — of the woman he loved so agonizingly.

Which is why he drew her gently near him and said:

— Dear Alicia, what I have to say to you is only to be expressed in joy and silence, but a deep, contemplative joy, and a silence more marvelous even than that which enfolds us now. Alas, oh my beloved, I love you; you know it! And that means it is only in your presence that I can truly live. For us to be worthy of this shared happiness, we must feel everything that is immortal about us, cherish those sensations, enshrine them in our minds. There, in the sphere of our entwined thoughts, no more disillusion, ever again! A single moment of that love is worth more than a century of any other sort.



Tell me, dear, why does this manner of love appear to you so strained and unreasonable? To me it appears perfectly natural, and indeed the only sort that leaves behind neither distress nor remorse. All the most ardent caresses of passion are multiplied in that sphere, a thousand times more intense and more real; everything there is noble, transfigured, liberated! What pleasure can you possibly take in forever disdaining the best part, the eternal part, of your own being? Ah, if I didn't fear the cruel sound of your laughter — so delicious and yet so hopeless — there are a thousand other things I might tell you, or rather a thousand divine experiences that we might share in silence!

Alicia still remained silent.

— But, Lord Ewald resumed with a gloomy smile, everything I've said is like Greek to you, isn't it? Then what is your question for me? What can I tell you — and what words, after all, can speak as eloquently as a kiss?

It was the first time in a long while that he had spoken to her of a kiss. Impressed no doubt by the magnetism of the surroundings and the situation, the young woman seemed ready to abandon herself to the enchanting embrace of Lord Ewald.

Had she actually understood the rich and subtle invitation of his passionate words? A sudden tear rolled down her dark, downcast lashes and over her pale cheek.

— How you suffer! she said softly. And all because of me!

At this emotion, this expression, the young man felt himself transported by a veritable access of amazement. He was in ecstasy. He no longer gave a thought to *the other*, the terrible new creation. A single human phrase had been enough to touch his heart, and to rouse in it indescribable hopes.

— Oh, my love! he murmured, almost beside himself.

And his lips brushed the lips that had at last restored and consoled him. He forgot the long arid and despairing hours he had undergone; his love revived. The infinite delights of pure joy bathed his soul, and the ecstasy of his joy was as sudden as it had been un hoped for. A single phrase had dissipated, like a gust of wind from heaven, all his gloomy and irritated thoughts! He was reborn! Hadaly and her empty mirages disappeared completely from his thoughts.

For several moments they remained silently entwined. The breast of the young woman heaved, and he was aware of her intoxicating fragrance; he caught her in his arms.

Over the heads of the two lovers the sky had once more become clear, and the stars twinkled down through the branches of the trees; the darkness deepened, the night became sublime. His soul lost in



ecstasy, the young man felt himself reborn to the beauty of the world.

At that moment, the obsessive notion returned to him that Edison was even now waiting in his lifeless caverns to show him the black prodigy of the Android.

— Ah, no, he said to himself, was I out of my mind? I was dreaming of a sacrilege, a plaything, a puppet, the mere sight of which would have made me laugh, I'm certain! A ridiculous, senseless doll! As if, in the face of a living young woman as beautiful as this one, all that madness wouldn't vanish on the spot! Electricity, hydraulic pressure, cylinders, and so on — ridiculous! Really, when we go back, I will thank Edison for his trouble and think of it no more. I must have been under a spell even to think of such a possibility; though he's a good man and a wonderful scientist, he simply over-persuaded me. — Oh, my darling! I know you, you exist, truly, as a creature of flesh and blood, like me! I feel your heart beat! You wept for me! Your lips stirred under the pressure of mine! You are a woman whom love can render as ideal as your beauty! Oh, dearest Alicia, I adore you! I...

He never finished the sentence.

As he raised his ecstatic eyes, wet with tears of joy, to the eyes of her whom he held trembling in his arms, he saw that she had raised her head and was looking fixedly at him. As his kiss melted on her lips, he caught a vague scent of amber and roses. A deep shudder shook his frame from head to foot, even before his understanding was able to grasp the thought that had just struck his mind like a thunderbolt.

At the same time Miss Alicia Clary rose from the bench and, placing on the young man's shoulders her hands *glittering with their many rings*, she said to him in a melancholy voice — in that unforgettably melodious, supernatural voice that he had heard before:

— Dear friend, don't you recognize me? I am Hadaly.

## CHAPTER V

### The Androsphinx

*I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones  
WOULD IMMEDIATELY CRY OUT!*

— New Testament

At this word the young man felt as if he had been directly insulted by Hell itself. If at that moment Edison had been present, Lord Ewald in defiance of all human consideration and gratitude would certainly have



murdered him on the spot, coldly and expeditiously. The blood rushed to his head and he seemed to see things through a thin red curtain. The twenty-seven years of his existence passed before his eyes in a flash. His pupils, dilated by the complicated horror of the situation, stared at the Android. His heart, gripped by a frightful sense of bitterness, burned within him like a lump of ice.

Mechanically, he adjusted his monocle and looked her up and down, from head to toe, from both sides, and then directly face to face.

He took her hand; it was the hand of Alicia! He breathed her perfume; his eye measured the curve of her bosom; it was certainly Alicia! He looked deep into her eyes; they were the very same eyes... only her expression was sublime! Her dress, her style, even that handkerchief with which she silently wiped away two tears that coursed down her lily cheeks—it was the woman herself... but transfigured! Become at last worthy of her own beauty, her real identity finally brought to life!

Wholly incapable of controlling himself, he closed his eyes; then, with the palm of his feverish hand, he wiped the drops of cold sweat from his temples.

He had just experienced, all of a sudden, the sensation that comes over a traveler when he is lost on a mountain pathway and hears his guide say in an undertone, "Don't look to your left," then carelessly does so—and suddenly sees, right beside his foot, one of those perpendicular drops so astonishingly deep that its bottom is hidden in the mists, but which, as it returns his horrified look, seems to be inviting him over the precipice.

He stood up, blaspheming inwardly, pallid, in silent anguish. Then just as abruptly he sat down, without saying a word, as if all action were impossible for him at that moment.

So he had been stripped of his first impulses of tender passion, of hope, of intimate adoration; they had been snatched from him. He had been made the victim of this inanimate mechanism, the dupe of this masterpiece of illusion. His heart was confounded, humiliated, thunderstruck.

He took in heaven and earth with a vague, outraged and sardonic sneer and cursed the Unknown for the unworthy insult inflicted on his soul. And that gesture returned him to full self-control.

Then he felt a thought flare up in the dark depths of his understanding, even more surprising than the recent phenomenon. It was simply this: that the woman represented by this mysterious doll at his side *had never found within herself the power to make him experience the sweet and sublime instant of passion that had just shaken his soul.*



Without this stupefying machine for fabricating the Ideal, he might never have known such joy. The words proffered by Hadaly had been spoken by the real actress, who never experienced them, never understood them. She had thought she was "playing a part," and now the character had taken her place within the invisible scene and had become the role. The false Alicia thus seemed far more *natural* than the real one.

He was drawn away from these reflections by a gentle voice.

Hadaly whispered into his ear:

— Are you quite certain *that I am not here?*

— No, replied Lord Ewald. Who are you?

## CHAPTER VI

### Figures in the Night

*Man is a fallen god who remembers the heavens.*

— Lamartine

Leaning over the young man, Hadaly spoke to him with the voice of the living woman:

— Many a time back there, in your ancient castle, wearied by your long day's hunting, many a time you rose from the table, Celian, without having touched your lonely supper, and following after torches that your heavy eyes could barely endure, you retreated to your bedchamber in search of the dark oblivion of slumber.

There, after a thought raised to God, you soon turned out the lamp and fell asleep.

And yet disturbing visions rose from the shades of sleep to harrow your soul!

You awoke with a start, pallid, staring into the darkness around your bed.

Then it was as if shadows or forms appeared before you; here and there you could distinguish a human face, staring at you with fixed solemnity. At once you tried to deny the evidence of your own eyes and explain away what you were seeing.

If you did not succeed, a dark anguish would prolong the dream left behind and trouble your soul.

To dispel these images, you relit the bedlight, and then you realized, rationally, that these faces, forms, or features were merely a result of nighttime shadows, reflections of remote clouds on the curtains, images



strangely animated by the silent mirages of the night, suggested by nothing more than your own clothes tossed hastily over the back of a chair just as you went to bed.

Smiling, then, at your recent distress, you put out the light again, and with perfect satisfaction at this new explanation you went peaceably back to sleep.

— Yes, said Lord Ewald, I remember, that's how it was.

— Oh! Hadaly resumed, it was all very rational! And yet you forgot that the most certain of all realities — you know perfectly well, it is that in which we are lost, which exists within us in purely ideal form (I speak, of course, of the Infinite) — that reality which is not mere reason. On the contrary. We have so dim an impression that no reason, even though conceding its unconditional necessity, could form any conception of it except through presentiments, dizzy ecstasies — or desires.

Well, then! At these moments when the spirit is still half-veiled in mists of sleep, and has not yet been fully caught up in the weary toils of Reason and Sense, it is still imbued with the mixed fluid of these rare and visionary experiences of which I speak. And then every man in whom the seed of a further election is already living, who already feels his acts and inward thoughts weaving the flesh and the form of his future rebirth, or, if you prefer, of his continuance, such a man becomes aware of a new and inexpressible dimension of space in and all around him, of which the apparent and accepted space in which we are trapped is *merely the metaphor*.

This living ether is a region without limits or restrictions within which the privileged traveler, as long as he remains there, feels able to project within the intimacy of his temporal being the shadowy harbingers and dark anticipations of the creature he will someday become. An affinity is thus established between his soul and those beings, still *in the future* for him, of the occult regions bordering on that of the senses. The path joining these two kingdoms leads through that domain of the Spirit which Reason — laughing and exulting in those heavy chains of hers, which triumph here though but for an hour — calls, in hollow disdain, mere IMAGINATION.

That is why your spirit, wandering on the frontier between dream and waking, experienced those impressions so vividly and disturbingly, and that is why your original, intuitive impression was no deception. *They were really there in the room around you, those who cannot be named* — those disturbing precursors who during the day appear only in the flash of an intuition, a coincidence, or a symbol.

Oh! When these presences venture through this infinite substance



of Imagination to enter our darkened beings (and what could be more favorable to such an event than these shadows that surround us, this silence unbroken), then by a kind of reciprocal and mediating action they reflect their presence — not *in* the soul, that is not yet possible, but *on* a soul disposed to welcome their visit. Such a soul, its Reason laid gently to rest, can come very close to their world, can almost escape its bonds and be mingled with their essence, already — oh! if you but knew!

And here, in the dark, Hadaly clasped the hand of Lord Ewald.

— If you but knew how they struggle to appear, how hard they try to reach their worldly mate and augment his faith, even through the Terrors of the Night! How they strive to dress themselves in all the available opacities that may reinforce tomorrow the memory of their passage! Are they deprived of eyes to see? No matter; they look at you through the stone of a ring, the decoration of a lamp, a gleam of starlight in the mirror. They have no lungs with which to speak? But they make themselves heard in the voice of the plaintive wind, in the creaking of an old chair, in the rattle of a decorative spear falling in a hallway (for there is a Foreknowledge that permits all these things). Do they have no material forms or visible features? They invent one for themselves in the fold of a drape; they materialize in the leafy pattern of a bush, or in the outlines of an everyday object, using the shadows of everything that surrounds you, I say, to become incarnate and to intensify to the utmost the impression they want to leave of their visit.

And the first *natural instinct* of the Soul is to *recognize* them, in and through that same holy terror that bears witness to them.

## CHAPTER VII

### Struggles with the Angel

*Positivism consists of forgetting as useless this absolute and unique truth — that a straight line passing under our nose has neither beginning nor end.*

— Someone

After a moment's silence, Hadaly, more and more deeply stirred, went on:

— Suddenly everyday Nature, alarmed by these approaches of the enemy, rushes up, leaps forward, and reenters the heart, by virtue of her formal title, not yet abridged. Rattling the loud logical rings of Rea-



son in order to stun you, as one shakes a baby's rattle to distract him, she reasserts herself within you. — Your anguish? She causes it, she *is* it. She alone, aware of her own wretched poverty before that other, immanent world, struggles to make you wake up — that is, to make you discover yourself in her, as your organism still in fact belongs to her — and in that very act dismiss your marvelous guests not only from your presence but from her gross domain entirely! Your "Common Sense"? Why, that's nothing but the spiderweb in which she catches and holds you while she paralyzes your luminous will to flight! That's how she preserves her own being and recaptures you, at the very moment when you are trying to get away! That knowing smile of yours, once you've recognized the walls of your prison cell and shaken off the obscure appearances, is the token of her momentary triumph, when you've re-persuaded yourself of her paltry reality and plunged yourself back into the narrow walls of her snare.

Then, as you go to sleep again, you are relieved because you have dismissed from your mind the precious presences who beseech you, your future intimates, whom you will inevitably know, whom you have already *recognized*! You have banished from your side all the sacred and reflexive realities of your Imagination! You have renounced your own holy Infinitude. And what is your reward for this? Oh, now you can sleep in peace!

You have planted your feet anew on the Earth — on this temptress earth that will always deceive you, as she deceived your predecessors. Back on "solid ground," you can revise your memories and correct your thoughts by purely rational considerations until these marvelous prodigies seem to you idle and empty phantoms. You tell yourself: "These are nothing but dream visions, hallucinations! Who knows?" And thus, placating yourself with a few fuzzy words, you mindlessly diminish in yourself the sense of your own supernatural being. As you get up next morning and lean out the open window to the fresh breezes of morning, your heart is full of joy, you're at peace with yourself; in the distance you hear the sound of living beings (beings just like you!) who are also getting up and going about their business, drunk with Reason, wildly excited by the box of toys possessed by a Humanity grown ripe already, and now turning to the sere and yellow.

In exchange, then, for that priceless birthright of yours, you choke down every last lentil on the paltry plate offered you with ironic and mocking smiles by those perpetually deceived martyrs of Well Being, but those who have turned their backs on Heaven, those who have cut themselves off from Faith, those who have deserted themselves, those



who have cauterized from their minds the idea of a God whose infinite holiness cannot be reached by the lies of their mortal corruption. And now you too end up surveying, with the delight of a child dazzled with a new toy, this glacial planet, which still circulates the renown of its ancient punishment through Space! Now it seems to you foolish and useless to recollect that, after a few more circles around this sun of ours, which is already mottled with the leprous signs of death, you are bound to depart forever from this sinister lump of mud, just as mysteriously as you arrived on it! That is the one stunningly clear destiny out of all those you can foresee for yourself.

And so, not without a skeptical laugh or two, you conclude by hailing this Reason of yours — you, who emerge from a grain of wheat, hailing the tottering and unstable creature of an hour — you propose to see it as the unquestioned “Legislator” of the *incomprehensible, shapeless, inescapable* INFINITE!

## CHAPTER VIII

### Angelic Aid

*Resurrection is a perfectly natural idea; there's nothing more astonishing about being born twice than once.*

— Voltaire, *The Phoenix*

Extraordinary though his feelings were, Lord Ewald listened patiently to the Android without any sense of how her argument bore on the question he had addressed to her.

But the radiant *Inspired One* continued, as if she had just raised some shadowy curtain.

— Thus, increasingly forgetful of your true origin, your true destination, in spite of all the warnings both of night and day, you were about to choose self-destruction — and all because of this unlucky and trifling passer-by whose voice and face I have assumed. Just like a child who wants to be born before the necessary gestation that makes him possible, you resolved to anticipate your hour — and you did not even wince at the impiety of the act or at the thought that you were closing off all the most sublime actions involved in overcoming your troubles.

But here I am now, I who come to you from those you will someday know to be your own sort! From those you have many times cast out, those who are uniquely in harmony with your thoughts! Oh, my forgetful beloved, listen a little more, before you decide to die!



I am an envoy to you from those limitless regions whose pale frontiers Man can contemplate only in certain reveries and dreams.

There all periods of time flow together, space is no more; the last illusions of instinct disappear.

You see the evidence in me; at the cry of your despair, I agreed to dress myself hastily in the radiant forms of your desire, in order to appear before you.

I called myself into existence in the thought of him who created me, so that while he thought he was acting of his own accord, he was also deeply, darkly obedient to me. Thus, making use of his craft to introduce myself into this world of sense, I made use of every last object that seemed to me capable in any way of drawing you out of it.

Then Hadaly, smiling and placing both hands on the shoulders of the young man, spoke to him in an intimate whisper:

— Who am I? A creature of dream, who lives half-awake in your thoughts, and whose shadow you may dissipate any time with one of those fine reasonable arguments that will leave you, in my place, nothing but vacancy, sorrow, and heartache — the fruits of that truth to which they pretend.

Oh! Never awake from me! Never cast me out on some pretext such as those that treacherous Reason is already whispering to you in an undertone. Recall that had you been born in other countries, your thought would take other forms, and that there is no other truth for Man than that which he chooses for his own out of many — all of them just as doubtful as the one he chooses: choose then the one that makes you a god. You ask "Who I am"? My being in this low world depends, *for you at least*, only on your free will. Attribute a being to me, affirm that I am! Reinforce me with your self. And then suddenly I will come to life under your eyes, to precisely the extent that your creative Good Will has penetrated me. Like a true woman, I will be for you only as you desire me. You still think of the living one? Compare! Already your passion for her has grown so weary that you cannot even accept the Earth; for me, the unpossessible, how could you ever think I would weary of recalling you to Heaven?

Here the Android grasped the two hands of Lord Ewald, whose amazement, mournful uncertainty, and admiration were reaching an indescribable climax. Her warm breath, like a summer breeze blowing off a field of flowers, lulled his mind. He said not a word.

— Are you afraid of interrupting me? she resumed. Take care! You forget that only through your choice can I be either living or inanimate — your misgivings may be fatal to me. If you question my being,



I am lost, and that means that you lose in me the ideal creature whom you might as easily have called into existence.

Oh! What a marvelous existence I may be granted if you have the *simplicity* to believe me! If you will defend me against your Reason!

It's up to you to choose between me and that ancient Reality which every day lies to you, tricks you, betrays you, drives you to desperation.

Have I displeased you? What I've said may seem too solemn, its imagery too subtle, perhaps? I am very serious and very subtle; my eyes have really penetrated into the realms of Death.

Think of it, and you will see that this manner of thinking is the only one that can be perfectly simple for me. But would you rather be with a joyful woman, one whose words resemble the song of birds? It's perfectly easy; put your finger on this sapphire which glows on the right side of my necklace, and I will be transformed into a woman like that—and you will miss the one who is gone. I have so many women in me, no harem could contain them all. Desire them, and they will exist! It's up to you to discover them within me.

But no! These other feminine potentials that live in me should not be roused. I despise them a little. You had better not touch that deadly fruit within this garden! You would be amazed—and my existence is still so slight that astonishment would wipe out my being and hide it behind a veil! What can you expect? My hold on life is even more fragile than that of living beings.

Accept my mystery just as it appears before you. All explanations (and they are oh! so easy) would probably turn out, after a little analysis, to be even more mysterious than the first one, but the sure thing, alas, is that they would be my annihilation within you. Wouldn't you prefer *that I exist*? Then never reason about my being; experience it joyously.

If you could understand how sweet is the night of my future soul, and through how many dreams you have been expecting me! If you knew how many treasures of desire, melancholy, and hope are hidden behind my impersonality! My ethereal flesh, which awaits but the breath of your spirit to become living, my voice within which the soul of harmony lies captive, my undying constancy—is that all nothing by comparison with this empty "reason" of yours, which will prove to you that I don't exist? As if you were not free to REJECT that empty, mortal evidence as itself doubtful—since nobody can define or explain that EXISTENCE of which it talks, nor say what the idea or the essence of it really is. Is it reason for regret that I'm not in the race of those women who betray? Or those who in their vows accept beforehand the



possibility of being widows? My love, which all but equals that with which the Angels burn, has seductions more captivating perhaps than those of the earthly senses, within which always slumbers the spirit of ancient Circe!

Hadaly paused for a moment, considering the young man whose stupefied gaze was fixed on her, then broke into a ripple of laughter.

— Oh, what absurd clothing we're wearing! Why do you put that bit of glass in your eye? Don't you see perfectly well, even without its help?

But... here I am asking you questions, just like a woman; and a woman is what I must not become: I should change!

Then, without any transition, and in a hollow voice:

— Oh, take me away with you, into your own country! To the dark castle! Oh, I yearn to lie down in my black silken coffin, where I shall sleep while the Ocean bears us off toward your country! Let the living shutter themselves in by their narrow firesides and hide themselves behind words and smirks! What matter? Let them consider themselves, if they want, more "modern" than you — as if, long before the Creation of worlds and worlds, the times were not just as "modern" as they are this evening and as they will be tomorrow!

Take advantage of those massive walls, captured and solidified by the blood of your illustrious ancestors in the days when they were forging your nation!

Believe it and never doubt that there will always be solitude on earth for those who are worthy of it! We shall not deign even to ridicule those you leave behind, though we could easily turn against them, and with interest, their silly sarcasms, their bored and blinded observations, their judgments drunk with a pride that is never anything but ridiculous and childish and absurd.

And shall we take the time to think of them? You know one always participates in the things of which one thinks; preserve us then, *from becoming such people*, even in the least degree, *by thinking about them!* Come. Once we are within the enchanted groves of your ancient forests, you will awake me, if you wish, with a kiss at which no doubt the Universe will shudder, aghast! But the will of a single individual outweighs the whole world.

And in the darkness Hadaly brushed with her lips the shuddering brow of Lord Ewald.



## CHAPTER IX

## Revolt

*What matter the bottle, when one is high on the wine?*

— Alfred de Musset

Lord Ewald was not just a man of courage, he was intrepid. The spirit of his family motto, *Etiam si omnes, ego non*, had been instilled in him by the action of the centuries, and it coursed even now in his veins; yet at these last words a long shudder ran through him. Then he arose, proud though haggard:

— So that's how it is! he murmured to himself. Miracles like these seem designed more to terrify the soul than to console it! What man ever supposed this sinister automaton would be able to play on my mind with such a collection of paradoxes inscribed on metal plates! Since when has God permitted machines to usurp the right of speech? And what laughable arrogance for these electric phantoms to dress themselves in the form of a woman and then pretend to take part in our existence! Ha ha ha! But I was forgetting; this is theater. I'm supposed to applaud. The last scene was indeed very strange! Bravo, then! Well done, Edison! Encore! Encore!

And, having adjusted his monocle, Lord Ewald lit a confident cigar.

The young man had just spoken up in the name of human dignity and even of Common Sense, both outraged by the marvel of Hadaly. No doubt what he had just said was not beyond a riposte, and no doubt if he had been brought before some formal tribunal his position might have drawn down on him a quick counterattack that wouldn't have been very easy to parry. When he asked, for example, "*Since when has God permitted machines to usurp the right of speech?*" a short answer might have been: "Since He saw that the foolish uses to which you put it would be quite embarrassing!" As for the phrase, "I was forgetting; this is theater," someone might have retorted:

—"Yes, and Hadaly is simply duplicating YOUR actress, with considerable improvements!" And that wouldn't have been altogether off the mark.

So true it is that even a superior man, when under great stress and giving into a streak of vanity, which he is ashamed to let show, may with the best intentions in the world, and even while defending admirable causes, compromise truth and justice — by a little "too much zeal."

By now Lord Ewald could not fail to be aware that he was involved in an adventure far darker and more serious than he had anticipated.



## CHAPTER X

## Incantation

— *Your eyes — clear pools, smiling stars in which was reflected my sacred love — now I must close them!*

— Richard Wagner, *Die Valkyrie*

The Android had bowed her head and, hiding her face in her two hands, was silently weeping.

Then, lifting the divine features of Alicia, but transfigured now and drenched in tears:

— So that's it! she said. You called for me and now you reject me. A single thought from you could give me life, and yet, like a prince unaware of the world's energies, you dare not exercise your power. You prefer before me a consciousness that you despise; you hide from your own divinity. You are terrified of the Ideal made captive. Common Sense has reclaimed you; as if enslaved to your own species, you yield to it, and so destroy me.

Creator doubtful of your own creation, you destroy it the instant it is called into being, before you have even finished your own work on it. Then, taking refuge in an arrogance both treacherous and legitimate, you will allow yourself to pity the ghost you have destroyed with a condescending smile.

Yet, considering the use that the creature I represent makes of Life, what was the point of depriving me of it? As a woman, I would have been one of those who can be loved without shame; I would have known how to grow old! I am more than human beings were before a Titan stole fire out of heaven and bestowed it on these ingrates! Now that I must destroy myself, nobody will ever redeem me from the Void! There is no longer a man on earth who, to give me a soul, will brave the beak of the undying vulture! Oh, how I would have come to weep with the Oceanids over his heart! Farewell, you who drive me into exile!

As she finished these words, Hadaly rose; then, heaving a heavy sigh, she walked to a tree and leaned there with her hand on its bark, as she looked out over the moonlit park.

The pale features of the enchantress glowed in the dark.

— Night, she said, speaking as familiarly as a child to her mother, here I am, the sacred offspring of living creatures, a flower of Science and Genius sprung after a history of six thousand years. You recognize



in my veiled eyes your own pale light, as from stars that will perish tomorrow; and you, souls of virgins dead before the nuptial kiss, you who float in holy awe about my presence, have no fear! I am the obscure creature whose disappearance is worthy not even of a moment's regret. My wretched breast deserves not even the dignity of being called sterile! The Void alone will receive the charm of my lonely kisses, the wind my lofty words. Let shadows and thunder accept my bitter caresses, and lightning alone will venture to pluck the false flower of my vain virginity. Driven out, I depart for the desert without an Ishmael; I shall be like those sad mother birds, blinded by cruel boys, who live out their melancholy cycle of maternity brooding on the bare ground. Oh, my enchanted park! You mighty trees who bless my brow with the shadow of your foliage! You charming plants on whom the dewdrops glisten, and who are yourselves greater than I! Bright streams whose drops glisten against the snowy foam more brilliant and clear than the gleam of tears on my face! And you, skies of Hope — alas, if I could but live! If I possessed the gift of life! Oh, how lovely it is to live! Happy those who live and breathe! Oh, Light, the joy of beholding you! Murmurs of enchantment, the pleasure of hearing you! Love, the ecstasy of being lost in your delights! Oh! To breathe just once, as they sleep at my feet, these roses, so young and lovely! Only to feel the night wind blowing in my hair! Only to be able to die!

Beneath the stars, Hadaly twisted her arms in anguish.

## CHAPTER XI

### Night Idyll

*Ora, Illora, De palabra  
Nace razon; Da luz el son  
O ven! ama! Eires alma,  
Soy corazon!*

— Victor Hugo, *The Song of Dea*

Suddenly she turned toward Lord Ewald:

— Farewell! she said. Rejoin your fellow creatures and tell them all about me, "the strangest thing in the world." You have every *reason* to do so, much good may it do you.

You lose as much as I do. Try to forget me; but no, that's impossible. The man who has looked on an Android as you looked on me has killed



the woman within him; for the Ideal when violated never pardons, and no man mocks divinity unscathed.

I return to my glittering caves. Farewell to you, who can no longer live.

Hadaly touched her handkerchief to her lips and wavering, moved slowly away.

She walked down the path toward the lighted doorway where Edison was waiting. Her form, blue and shadowy in the dusk, floated past the great tree trunks, and as a moonbeam fell on it through a clearing, she turned toward the young man. Silently she lifted her two hands to her mouth and, with a frightful gesture of despair, blew him a last kiss. Then, overwhelmed, beside himself, Lord Ewald strode quickly toward her, reached her, and flung his arms around a waist that yielded, half-fainting, under the strength of his embrace.

— Phantom! Phantom! Hadaly! he cried, we must not part! Little credit to me for preferring your amazing miracles before that dull, deceptive, cold-hearted friend whom fate picked out for me! But let heaven and earth take it as they will, I shall bury myself with you, my shadowy idol! I resign from the human race — and let the age go about its business! For at last it's clear to me that, set one beside the other, and it's the living girl who is the phantom!

Hadaly, at these words, seemed on the point of collapse; then, with a gesture of infinite abandon, she flung her arms around the neck of Lord Ewald. From her heaving breast, as she pressed it against him, came the odor of asphodels; and her long hair, falling loose, fell down her back and over her dress.

A new grace, which was effortless, languid, and profound, softened her severe and classic beauty; she seemed unable to speak! Her head resting on the young man's shoulder, she looked up at him through her lashes, smiling a secret and radiant smile. Half goddess, half woman, a sensual illusion, her beauty terrified the night. She seemed to drink in the soul of her lover, as if to make it her own; her half-open lips, trembling and alight, quivered as they met those of her creator in a virginal kiss.

— At last, oh my beloved, she said in a hollow voice, at last I have found you!



## CHAPTER XII

## Penseroso

*Farewell till the dawn of the day I foresee,  
The day which will once more unite me with thee!*  
— The music of Schubert

A moment later Lord Ewald stepped back into the laboratory, still clasping Hadaly by the waist. She walked uncertainly; her expression was grave, her face pale and drawn, and she still rested her head against the shoulder of her companion.

Edison was standing, arms crossed, before a long and splendid coffin of black ebony. Its two covers stood wide open, revealing an interior of black satin that exactly modeled a feminine form.

One would have thought it a modern improvement on an Egyptian coffin, suitable for the burial of a Cleopatra. To the right and to the left in compartments of the walls were ranged a dozen strips of magnetic tin, like funerary scrolls, a manuscript, a glass wand, and various other items of equipment. Edison, standing against the intricate control panel of a giant accelerator, watched fixedly as Lord Ewald came toward him. As if suddenly returned to her senses, the Android remained motionless.

— My friend, said Lord Ewald, Hadaly is a gift such as only a demigod could bestow. Never in the bazaars of Baghdad or Cordova was such a slave displayed before the caliphs! Never did a magician evoke such a vision! Scheherazade, in her *Thousand and One Nights*, would never have dared to imagine her, lest doubt seize on the Sultan Shahryar. No treasure would suffice to buy this masterpiece. If at first it forced me into a moment of anger, admiration soon overcame me.

— Do you accept her? the Electrician demanded.

— Truly, I should be a madman if I refused!

— Now WE ARE EVEN! said Edison solemnly. He held forth both hands, which Lord Ewald grasped warmly.

— Will you dine with me tonight, *both of you, as we did the other time?* said Edison with a smile. If you like, we can pick up the other conversation; you will see that Hadaly's remarks will be . . . different from those of her model.

— No, said Lord Ewald; I'm in haste to be the prisoner of this sublime mystery.

— Farewell, Miss Hadaly, Edison addressed her. Will you remember,



down there, your underground room — where sometimes we used to chat about the man who would wake you to our pallid existence as living beings?

— Oh, my dear Edison, the Android replied, bowing before the inventor, my resemblance to mortals does not extend to the point of forgetting my creator.

— By the way, Edison asked lightly — what about the living one?

Lord Ewald started.

— My word, he said, I'd quite forgotten her.

Edison spoke casually.

— Well, as a matter of fact, she just departed, in a fit of pique. You two had barely gone out for your stroll when she came in here, quite recovered from her hypnotic influence, and subjected me to such a flood of words that I couldn't hear a single thing of all that you must have been saying to one another in the park. And yet I had some new contraptions arranged so that . . . well, never mind. I see that Hadaly, freed for the first time in her *life* to the promptings of her own nature, has showed herself worthy; future ages will be proud of her. And, to tell you the truth, I never doubted her for an instant. As for the other lady, who, for you at least, has just died in her, Miss Alicia Clary just now told me, loud and clear, that she would have nothing to do with these new roles. Their language, she said, was unintelligible, and she couldn't remember it; and the *long passages* made her head ache. So that from now on, she said, "after thinking it all out," she would content herself by making her debut "in certain comic operas that she knew pretty well"; their success, "*which was quite definite already*, was bound to bring her to the attention of men of taste." As for her statue, she said you would be leaving Menlo Park tomorrow, and all I would have to do would be "to send it to her in London." She was even kind enough to add that "as for my expenses, I could *get a stiff price* out of you, since she understood one didn't haggle with artists." And on that note Miss Alicia Clary said farewell, asking me to remind you (in case I saw you again) "that she was expecting you over there, to make the arrangements." Well, that clears the air. Once in London, my dear fellow, all you need do is let her follow her career in peace. A letter, accompanied by a "princely" gift, will inform her that it's all over — and that will do it. Swift put it simply: What is a mistress? A belt and a cloak, no more.

— I had something like that in mind, said Lord Ewald.

Hadaly, gently raising her head from Lord Ewald's shoulder, gestured at the inventor and murmured in soft, pure tones with a mysterious smile:



— He will come to see us at Athelwold, won't he?

At this simple and natural request, the young man repressed a start of admiration and amazement; he replied with a consenting nod of the head.

But, oddly enough, it was Edison who shuddered at these words and looked fixedly at Hadaly.

Suddenly he smote his brow, smiled broadly, knelt before the Android and, pushing away the hem of her skirt, began making some adjustment on the heels of her two slippers.

— What is it? said Lord Ewald, bewildered.

— I am disconnecting Hadaly! replied Edison — isolating her, in a word, since she no longer belongs to anyone but you. In the future she will respond only to the rings and the necklace. On the various points of her operation, the Manuscript will supply you with the most precise and explicit details. Very soon you will come to understand how the sixty basic hours engraved within her can be enriched with infinite complexities. It's a game of chess; it's altogether limitless, like a woman. She also has the two other major feminine types, various subdivisions of which can be easily obtained merely by "mingling their duality." The results are irresistible.

— My dear Edison, I personally believe that Hadaly is a true phantom, and I have no wish to explain or explore the mystery animating her. I hope soon to forget the little you've taught me on the subject.

Hadaly pressed tenderly the hand of the young lord, and said softly and quickly into his ear, while the engineer knelt at her feet:

— Don't tell him what I just said to you a little while ago; it's for your ears alone.

Edison rose, holding in his hand two little copper terminals he had unscrewed, attached to strands of copper wire so slender that, until now, even with their insulating material, they had remained invisible in the Android's steps. These inductors had blended in with the floor, the ground, the fur rugs on which Hadaly had walked. No doubt they were linked, somewhere in the distance, with hidden generators.

The Android now seemed to shudder in all her limbs; Edison touched the clasp of her necklace.

— Help me! she said.

And supporting herself with a hand on the shoulder of Lord Ewald, she smilingly entered her beautiful coffin, moving with ghostly grace into its dark recesses.

Then, having drawn her long wavy hair around her, she lay down gently within it.

She slipped over her brow the linen bandage intended to hold her



head in place, and keep her face from touching either the sides or the cover of the coffin; then she fastened tightly about her body several wide bands of silk, so that no jolt or tilt could cause her to move.

— Dear friend, she said, crossing her arms over her breast, you will wake the sleeper when we have made our crossing; until then, we shall see one another . . . in the world of dreams!

She closed her eyes, as if asleep.

The two halves of the cover closed over her gently, hermetically, noiselessly. A silver plaque inscribed with a coat of arms was fixed on the coffin above the word HADALY, written in Oriental characters.

— The sarcophagus, said Edison, will soon be placed, as I told you, in a larger square chest with a convex lid; the interior is tightly packed with thick stuffing. We take this precaution simply to keep curious outsiders from indulging in speculations. Here is the key to the coffin, and this is the invisible mechanism that opens the lid.

And he pointed to a little black star, almost imperceptible, at about the level of Hadaly's pillow.

— And now, he added, offering a chair to Lord Ewald, how about a glass of sherry? We still have a few words to exchange.

Edison, turning a crystal switch, lit the lofty lamps that added their light to the softer glow of the oxyhydric bulbs to produce the effect of bright sunshine.

Then he turned on the red signal light above the laboratory and, having closed all the curtains, returned to his guest.

On a sideboard stood glittering Venetian glasses and a bottle of old sherry.

— I drink to the Impossible! said the electrician with a grave smile.

The young lord clinked his glass with Edison's in a gesture of assent; and a moment later, they faced one another for a final accounting.

## CHAPTER XIII

### Rapid Explanations

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

— Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

After a long session of silent thought:

— This is the only question I would like to ask you, said Lord Ewald. You spoke to me of a female assistant, a certain person called Miss Any



Sowana — who, it appears, undertook to model, measure, and trace limb by limb that tiresome living original, during the first days at least.

From what Alicia told me, I gather she was “very pale, middle-aged, very taciturn, always in mourning, appearing to have been once very beautiful. Her eyes were almost always closed, to the point that it was impossible to tell what color they were; yet she saw everything very clearly.” And Miss Clary added that once, when she was on the platform, this strange sculptress massaged her for a full half hour, from head to foot, silently, as if she were an attendant in a Turkish bath. She only paused occasionally “to scribble figures and draw lines on bits of paper, which she immediately handed to you.”

“And all this while a long ‘streak of fire,’ focused on the nudity of the model, seemed to follow the icy hands of the artist as if she was drawing with light.”

— Well, then? asked Edison.

— Well, then, Lord Ewald took him up, if I judge of her by that first and wonderfully *remote* voice of Hadaly, this Miss Any Sowana must be a strange and remarkable creature.

— Well! said Edison, I see you’ve been thinking things over, every evening in your cottage, and that you’ve tried to reach an explanation of the process on your own. Excellent. You’ve guessed, I’m sure, some of the preliminary stages; but who could ever imagine the accidental but miraculous circumstances through which I became master of the whole process? The story simply illustrates that all things come to he who searches.

Perhaps you recall the tale I told you, down there, of a certain Edward Anderson? What you are now asking for is the *end* of that tale; and here it is.

Pausing a moment to regroup his thoughts, Edison resumed:

— After her husband’s bankruptcy and miserable suicide, Mrs. Anderson found herself dispossessed from her house and thrown penniless upon the world with her two children, aged ten and twelve. Her only hope was the very uncertain charity of a few casual business acquaintances, and the stresses of this catastrophe were simply too much for her. She was stricken with a disease that reduced her to complete inactivity — one of those complete neurotic collapses known to be incurable. (In her case it took the form of a protracted cataleptic trance.)

I have told you how much I admired the spirit of this woman, and — believe me, my lord — her intelligence. It therefore occurred to me to help her in her misfortune, as you once upon a time came to my aid! So, in the name of our old friendship (made all the dearer to me by her



misfortune), I did my best to get the two children into good homes, and took steps to shelter their mother from all distress.

A considerable period passed without any change.

Often, in the course of my too-infrequent visits to this invalid, I had occasion to observe these strange and *persistent* sleeplike trances, during which she spoke to me and answered me without ever opening her eyes. There are a number of such cases of lethargic somnolence documented today during which individuals sometimes remain three months on end without taking any food. At last, perhaps because I have a fairly well developed faculty of attention, I determined to cure, if it was humanly possible to do so, the particular affliction of Mrs. *Any* Anderson.

Noting the emphasis placed on that first name by the engineer, Lord Ewald started in amazement.

— Cure her? he murmured. Transfigure her, rather. Wasn't that what it amounted to?

— Perhaps, replied Edison. Oh, I saw the other evening, when, through the use of Suggestion, I reduced Miss Alicia Clary to a state of cataleptic hypnosis in less than an hour, and you showed no surprise — I saw then that you were familiar with these new experiments undertaken by the leaders in this particular field. As you know, they have demonstrated that the Science of Human Magnetism — it is both very ancient and very new — is a positive, indisputable field of knowledge. In a word, the various currents of nervous fluid are no less a fact than are currents of electricity.

Well, I don't recall exactly when the idea struck me of making use of magnetism for whatever advantage this wretched sufferer could draw from it. Perhaps her physical lethargy could be overcome in this way. I studied the most effective methods; then I began to practice, and with some persistence, working at the problem every day for about two months. Finally, when I had been able to produce all the known phenomena, one after another, certain other phenomena began to appear. Science, not knowing what to make of them, was in some difficulty, but I think this uncertainty will dissipate before long. Completely mysterious crises of mental clairvoyance occurred at the darkest point of these long unconscious spells.

Then Mrs. *Any* Anderson *became my secret*. Because of the state of vibrant, high-strung torpor in which she existed, I was soon able to exercise one of my abilities which is perhaps innate, that of projecting my will into another. With practice, this gift developed, until now, given certain natures, I feel able to exert enough nervous energy to dominate another person almost completely, at a considerable distance —



and this in a matter not of a few days but of a few hours. I was thus able to establish a current between this rare sleeper and myself, so subtle that I could make the following use of two congeneric metal rings founded and impregnated by me with a certain quantum of magnetic fluid. (Didn't I tell you it would be a story of pure magic?) Then it was enough for Mrs. Anderson — or, rather, Sowana — to put on one of these rings while I was wearing the other, to undergo the instant and truly occult transmission of my will! She also found herself mentally, fluidically, and actually in my presence, to the point of hearing my voice and obeying my orders — even though, physically, her sleeping body was twenty leagues away. Holding the mouthpiece of a telephone, she would instantly answer questions I murmured in a low voice through electric transmissions. How many conversations we have carried on in this way, to the actual contempt of space this spiritualized creature and I!

I said *Sowana* just now. You're doubtless well aware that most of the great hypnotic patients wind up referring to themselves in the third person, like little children. They see themselves from outside their own organisms, outside their own sensory systems. In order to get further outside themselves and help them escape their physical personality (call it "social" if you will), some of them, once in the state of clairvoyance, have the curious custom of rebaptizing themselves. The dream name comes to them, no one knows whence, and by this they INSIST on being called as long as their luminous sleep endures — to the point of refusing to answer to any other name. Thus it happened that one day, quite suddenly in the middle of a completely different sentence, Mrs. Anderson spoke to me with perfect, almost terrifying simplicity, these unforgettable words:

— My friend, I remember Annie Anderson, who lies sleeping down there where you are; but *here* I remember another *me* whose name for a long time has been Sowana.

— What frightening things I'm learning this evening, the young man murmured, after a moment of stunned silence.

— Indeed: one would say we are on the outer limits of a field of human experience verging on the "Fantastic!" resumed Edison. Still, whether it was sensible or absurd, this bizarre wish of hers had to be satisfied — so that in all our long-distance conversations I no longer call Mrs. Anderson by another name than the one she has claimed.

And I do so the more readily because the moral being that I recognized in Mrs. Anderson before her illness, and that which I discover at the depths of her hypnotic slumber, seem to me absolutely distinct. She



used to be a simple woman, perfectly honorable, even intelligent, but, after all, of very limited views — and so I knew her. But in the depths of her slumber another person is revealed to me, completely different, many-sided and mysterious! So far as I can tell, the vast knowledge, the strange eloquence, and the penetrating insight of this sleeper named Sowana — who is, physically, the same woman — are logically inexplicable. Isn't this duality a stupefying phenomenon? And yet this same duality, though lesser in degree and not quite so striking, is a regularly observed, a recognized phenomenon in almost all the subjects treated by trained hypnotizers. Sowana is exceptional only as an abnormally perfect instance of a very common event — and this abnormality is due simply to her particular variety of neurosis.

The moment has now come for me to tell you, my lord, that after the demise of the adorable Evelyn Habal, the artificial girl, I felt obliged to show Sowana that collection of burlesque relics which I carried off from Philadelphia as trophies of war, so to speak. At the same time, I gave her a fairly distinct outline of my plan for Hadaly. You can't imagine the gloomy delight, the vengeful excitement, with which she accepted and encouraged my plan! No time to be lost, I must go to work at once! And so I began the task, then became absorbed in it to the point that for two years it took me away from my work on electric power and new light bulbs for which Humanity was waiting. No matter for that, nor for the few million ridiculous dollars I lost! For at last when all the complexities of the Android's organism were completed, I put them all together and showed her the ghostly creature, the youthful inanimate armature.

Once having seen it, Sowana, as if subject to some demonic spirit of exultation, forced me to explain all its most hidden secrets — until, when she had studied every last detail, she was able, *occasionally*, TO INCORPORATE HERSELF WITHIN IT, AND ANIMATE IT WITH HER "SUPERNATURAL" BEING.

Struck by this strange relationship, I quickly worked out with all the ingenuity I could a complex system of controls, involving invisible inductors and some completely new condensers; I added to it a controlling cylinder exactly corresponding to that controlling the motions of Hadaly. When Sowana had learned all about it, one day she sent me the Android without any advance notice, sent her right here while I was just finishing another job. I tell you that the sight of that vision caused the most terrible shock I ever felt in my life. The workman was aghast at his own work.

And my first thought afterward was this: "When this phantom



has become the exact duplicate of a woman, what will she be!"

Henceforth all my thoughts and plans were calculated on this one point, of finding a bold soul who would someday attempt what you and I together have this night made a reality. For, I must make this point very clear to you, *not everything about this creature is an illusion!* It is really an unknown creature, it actually is the Ideal, in real truth it is Hadaly who has appeared to you, though behind these veils of electricity, beneath this silver armor which simulates feminine Humanity. You must always recall that, though I know Mrs. Anderson, *I swear to you on my soul THAT I DO NOT KNOW SOWANA!*

Lord Ewald shuddered at this solemn phrase from the engineer; the latter continued thoughtfully:

— Stretched beneath the shady trees and flowered groves of our cave, Sowana lay with her eyes shut and her mind wandering far beyond the heavy materiality of any physical organism; and in that state, she incorporated herself, as a fluid vision, within Hadaly! Within her solitary hands, like those of a dead woman, she held the metallic correspondences of the Android; she walked in the footsteps of Hadaly, spoke within her in that strangely distant voice which vibrates from her lips during her sacred sleeplike trances! And all I had to do was repeat, *but silently*, what you said, to have this spirit, unknown to both of us, hear what you had said, and then reply to it through the phantom.

*Where* did she reply from? *Where* did she hear? *Whom* had she gradually become? What is this unquestionable fluid that, like the legendary ring of Gyges, confers on its wearer ubiquity, invisibility, a complete new intellectual character? In a word, whom are we dealing with?

Questions, crying aloud for answers.

Recall, if you will, that response of Hadaly's — so *natural!* — to the enlarged photograph of Alicia that I projected on the wall. Or, *down below*, her interest in the thermometric mechanism for measuring the heat of rays from the stars, her improvised explanation of the whole process; or that remarkable scene with the purse! Do you recall the precision with which Hadaly described the exact costume worn by Miss Alicia Clary as she sat in the railroad car, reading by lamplight your telegram sent just that night? Do you see, can you imagine by what subtle, almost incredible means that feat of clairvoyance was achieved? Listen. You are imbued, you are saturated with the nervous fluid of your adored and detested living. But at a certain moment, if you recall, Hadaly *took you by the hand* to draw you toward the box containing those awful relics of the stage star. Well, the nervous fluid of Sowana, *thanks to this pressure of Hadaly's hand*, found itself, through the intimate transmis-



sion of the other fluid, in close proximity to yours. At this moment, in spite of the apparent distance between you and your mistress, it was able to fly forth through the networks, which remained invisible, and reach the center, that is, Miss Alicia Clary in the railway carriage that was bringing her to Menlo Park.

— Is it possible? said Lord Ewald in an undertone.

— No, it is not, the electrician replied. But it's a fact nonetheless. So many other things that appear impossible happen every day now, that I can't be too tremendously surprised at this, especially since I'm one of those who can never forget the immense quantity of Nothing that was necessary to create the Universe.

In any case, my restless dreamer was stretched out on cushions thrown over a large sheet of plate glass supported on insulators; she held her hands on a series of switches that electrified the Android and maintained a delicate current between the two. And I may add that there is such an affinity between the nervous and the magnetic fluids to which she is subjected that I'm not at all surprised at the success of the clairvoyant experiment — especially in the present surroundings.

— Just a minute, said Lord Ewald. I'm sure it's already a remarkable thing that electric current can now transmit energy to great heights and over enormous, almost limitless distances. Indeed, if I'm to believe the reports that flood in from every direction, there's no doubt that tomorrow it will be used to spread through a thousand different networks that enormous blind energy, which always hitherto went to waste, of cataracts and torrents — and, for all I know, of the tides, perhaps. This trick is perfectly comprehensible, given the use of *tangible* conductors — magic highways — through which the powerful currents flow. But this SEMISUBSTANTIAL transmission of my living thought, how can I imagine it taking place, at a distance, *without conductors or wires, even the very thinnest?*

— In the first place, replied the electrician, distance in these matters is nothing but a kind of illusion. Besides, you overlook here a number of facts recently verified by experimental Science. For example, it is not just the nervous fluid of a living being that can be transmitted over a distance, but the simple *virtue* of certain substances. Such substances can influence the human organism from afar without *ingestion, suggestion, or induction*. Here is an experiment that has been witnessed by today's most positivist physicians. A certain number of crystal jars are hermetically sealed and placed in envelopes; each contains a different drug, the name of which is concealed from me, the experimenter. I take one of them at random and hold it ten or twelve centimeters



behind the head of . . . let's say, a hysteric. Within a few minutes the subject is seized with convulsions, he vomits, sneezes, shouts aloud, or goes to sleep, according to the specific drug held behind his head at that distance. In fact, if it is a deadly poison the patient will display all the symptoms of that particular poison; they may even lead to his death. If it's a particular electuary, he will promptly fall into a religious ecstasy of a very precise character; his hallucinations will *always* be religious, even if he's a devotee of a very different religious cult. If I hold a chloride compound near him, you will see that the mere *proximity* burns him to such a degree that he emits cries of pain. Where are the conductors causing these responses? And before these unquestionable facts, which strike experimental scientists with well-grounded stupefaction, why shouldn't I hypothesize a new sort of fluid, a mixed fluid, combining the electric and the nervous energies, halfway between that which moves the magnetic needle to point at the North Pole, and that which paralyzes a bird placed under the beating wings of a hawk?

If some sort of *inductive affinity* can carry the vibrant influence of various drugs through the pores of the glass and the thicknesses of paper, to influence a patient in a state of hysterical supersensitivity, this is no more than a magnet does when its power passes through glass and through cloth to attract distant molecules of iron. And if *even vegetables and minerals* have an obscure sort of magnetism which without material connectors can cross distances and pass over obstacles to imprint their virtue on living beings, why should I be surprised if among three individuals of the same species, held together by a common electromagnetic center, should so coincide to the extent of producing the phenomenon in question?

To conclude, from the moment when the hidden sensibility of Sowana showed itself susceptible of secret influence from electric fluid — from a very slight shock, for example, administered down here to Mrs. Anderson — I sensed that electrical fluid and nervous fluid were linked by some sort of affinity. In other respects, there was no connection; in the cataleptic state, no outside influence could reach her, to the point that Mrs. Anderson could have been burned alive without influencing Sowana in the slightest. But the connection between the two fluids was evidently a fact; consequently, I began to suppose that to some extent various of their properties might be synthesized to create a third power of unknown nature and characteristics. The man who could discover this new fluid and manage it like the two others would be capable of performing feats to shame those of the Indian yogis, the bonzes of Tibet, the snake charmers of Coromandel, and the dervishes of central Egypt.



After a moment's reflection, Lord Ewald replied:

— Though I agree that I probably shouldn't ever see Mrs. Anderson, Sowana, I think, deserves to be a friend; and if, in this magical environment, she can hear me, I hope this wish reaches her, *wherever* she is! But one last question: Is it true that the words Hadaly spoke just now in the park were all recited — “declaimed,” so to speak, by Miss Alicia Clary?

— Absolutely, said Edison, and you know it, since you must have recognized both the voice and the gestures of the original. She was only able to recite the speeches so well (particularly since she didn't understand a word of them) because of the patient and powerful suggestions of Sowana.

Lord Ewald was totally confounded by this reply; and this time, in fact, the explanation made no sense. The fact that all the different phases of the scene could have been anticipated (and yet the voice suggested that they *had* been anticipated) was simply inconceivable.

He was about to protest, and to prove to the engineer that his explanation was radically and absolutely impossible, when he bethought him, suddenly, of the strange request that Hadaly had made of him, in a whisper, just before she closed herself in her artificial tomb.

And that was why, keeping all his thoughts to himself, as well as the odd sensation of vertigo he was experiencing, he said nothing. But he cast an uneasy glance or two toward the coffin; he had just caught a distinct glimpse of a shade from beyond the tomb, within the Android.

Edison, however, never noticed this glance and continued his lecture:

— The state of constant spirituality and supreme visionary insight at which *the real life* of Sowana unfolds, confers on her intense powers of suggestion, especially with subjects already half-hypnotized by me. The effects of her will, even on their intelligence, are instant.

It was only because she was under this influence that your actress submitted for days on end to rehearsals on this stage, where she was surrounded by my invisible cameras and recorders. She performed every last detail of the various scenes that Hadaly possesses and that characterize her. And this down to the least of her intonations, gestures, and glances, all of which were called forth, inspired, you might say, in this beautiful innocent by Sowana. Hadaly's meticulous golden lungs, guided by the skillful hands of Sowana, recorded only the one perfect vocal nuance out of twenty — that happened sometimes. Meanwhile I, with a micrometer in my hand and my strongest magnifying glass in focus, devoted myself to chiseling on the Android's central cylinder none but the perfectly coordinated movements, none but the most subtle glances



and joyous or serious expressions of Alicia. During the eleven days that this work demanded, work on the Android's other physical characteristics — except, of course, for the chest — proceeded apace under my scrupulous instructions. Would you like to see the several dozen photo-chromic pictures on which are marked the points (precise to several thousandths of a millimeter) where the grains of metallic powder had to be placed in the flesh for the exact magnetic implementation of Miss Alicia Clary's five or six basic smiles? I have them right here, in these boxes. Naturally the various expressions on the features are coordinated with the sense of the words — just as some five different adjustments of the eyebrows modulate the ordinary expressions of this very interesting young lady.

At bottom, all this work, which in its entirety is bound to seem so complex and so difficult of accomplishment, reduces itself under analysis, attention, and perseverance to so little that, once I was sure of my general formulas (based on a bit of calculus, and not altogether easy to formulate — I stayed up nights, working on them!), the close, detailed work of refraction was neither painful nor difficult. Everything worked itself out! Several days ago, I was closing up the armature and applying, little by little, first in the form of powder, then layer by layer, the artificial flesh that was to cover all those thousands of infinitesimal wires emerging from imperceptible openings in the armor. And just then Hadaly — still lost in limbo — repeated for me, without a single slip, every one of the various scenes that constitute the mirage of her mental state.

But today, all day, both here and in the park, her final rehearsal — at which I stood between her, dressed as she was like her model, and Sowana — that confounded me!

She was Humanity at its best — minus that which is unnamable in us, minus that intangible element whose absence at moments like that can hardly be censured. I was, and I admit it, as enraptured as a poet. What melancholy incantations, embodying the voluptuous vision of the dream! What a voice, what penetrating depth in those eyes! What songs! What beauty, as of a forgotten goddess! What bewitching landscapes of the feminine soul! What unknown invitations to an impossible love! With a mere touch of the rings, Sowana transfigured this poetess of enchanted dreams. Indeed, as I told you, her amazing and overwhelming scenes were created for her by the foremost among the most brilliant poets and thinkers of this century.

Over there, when you wake her up in your ancient castle — after the first cup of pure water and banquet of lozenges — you will see what a talented phantom will appear before you! As soon as Hadaly's habits and



presence have become familiar to you, you will become her sincere interlocutor. For if I have furnished the physical basis for her illusions, a Soul that is unknown to me has passed over my work and, incorporating itself there forever, has laid her hand on the slightest details of those superb and inspiring scenes, imposing on them, believe me, an art so subtle that it surpasses, in all truth, the reach of human imagination.

Within this new work of art a creature from beyond the reach of Humanity has insinuated herself and now lurks there at the heart of the mystery, a power unimagined before our time.

#### CHAPTER XIV

### Farewells

*The hour of parting, when each one goes his way.*

— Victor Hugo, *Ruy Blas*

— And so, Edison concluded, the work is finished, and I can conclude that it has not resulted in an empty or lifeless simulacrum. A soul has been added, or so we may say, to the voice, the gestures, the intonations, the smile, the very pallor of the living woman who was your love. In her all these qualities were dead, deceptive, degraded, because they were enslaved to vulgar, selfish reason; beneath their veils now lurks a feminine being who is, and perhaps always was, the true and rightful possessor of this extraordinary beauty, since she has shown herself worthy of it. In this way she who was the victim of the Artificial has at last redeemed the Artificial! She who was abandoned and betrayed by a love turned degrading and obscene has grown into a vision capable of inspiring love at its most sublime! She who was blighted in her hopes, her health, and her prosperity by a wretched suicide has prevented another suicide. Speak your final judgment now between shadow and reality. Do you think such an illusion can hold you in this world or is worth the struggle of living?

As his only answer, Lord Ewald arose and drew out of its ivory case a small pistol, which he handed to Edison:

— My dear enchanter, said he, permit me to leave with you a little souvenir of this extraordinary adventure! You have won, and I surrender my weapon to you.

Edison, rising also, accepted the gun, played thoughtfully with the trigger, then pointed it out the open window and into the night.

— Here's a bullet, he said, that I send to the Devil, if he exists — and



if he does, I rather suspect he's somewhere in this neighborhood.

— Ha, ha! Just like in *Der Freischütz*! laughed Lord Ewald, struck by this prank of the great man.

The pistol sent a bullet into the dark.

— A hit, a palpable hit! came an extraordinary shout from the park.

— What's that? asked Lord Ewald, taken aback.

— Nothing. Just one of my old phonographs, having its joke! Edison replied.

— I'm depriving you of a masterpiece such as no man ever knew! said Lord Ewald after a moment.

— Not at all, Edison replied, since I still have the formula. But . . . I shall fabricate no more Androids. My underground caves will be used to house secret laboratories in which I will work on other discoveries.

And now, my lord Celian Ewald, a last glass of sherry, and farewell. You have chosen the world of dreams; take with you the high priestess of it. My destiny keeps me chained to pale "realities." The traveling chest and carriage are ready; my workmen, well armed, will escort you to New York, where the captain of the transatlantic liner *Wonderful* will be expecting you. We shall meet again, perhaps, in Athelwold Castle. Write to me. Your hand! Farewell!

There was a final handclasp between Edison and Lord Ewald, and a moment later the Englishman was mounted on his horse beside the carriage, surrounded by the torches of his formidable escort.

The cavalcade got under way, and within a few minutes the strange procession was out of sight on the road toward the little station of Menlo Park.

Alone in the brightly lit center of his pandemonium, Edison walked slowly toward the black drapes whose long folds covered something. In response to his hand, they slowly parted.

Before him was a woman of elegant appearance, dressed entirely in mourning and no doubt sleeping on a large couch of red velvet which rested on glass disks. Her face was still youthful, though her rich dark hair was touched with silver around the temples. Though severe, her beauty still retained much charm, and from the pure oval of her face radiated a kind of supernatural tranquillity. Her hand, resting on the carpet, held the mouthpiece of an Electrophone, but muffled by a thick mask, so that when she spoke into it nobody could hear her, even if he were standing right beside her.

— Ah, Sowana, said Edison jovially, this must be the first time that Science showed it could cure Man, even of love!

But the visionary seer made no answer. Edison took her hand; it was



icy cold. He shuddered and bent over her; her pulse no longer beat, her heart had stopped.

For a long time he continued to make the hypnotic passes of awakening and revival over the head of the sleeper — but in vain.

After an hour of anxiety and vain efforts to rouse her, Edison sensed at last that she who seemed to sleep had definitely left the world of the living.

## CHAPTER XV

### Fate

*And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.*

*And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created . . .*

— Genesis

About three weeks after these events, Edison, who had received neither letters nor cables from Lord Ewald, began to worry.

One evening about nine the engineer was seated alone in his laboratory, next to a lamp, turning the pages of a major American newspaper, when his eye caught the following item, which riveted his attention till he had read it twice over in total shock and amazement.

#### LLOYD'S. — DISPATCH. MARITIME NEWS

The loss of the steamer *The Wonderful*, which we announced yesterday, has just been confirmed, and we are now in a position to supply the following details of this unhappy accident.

Fire broke out in the rear hold about two o'clock in the morning; it began in a cargo compartment where several barrels of turpentine and gasoline were ignited by an unknown cause, and soon exploded.

Seas were heavy, the steamer was pitching stiffly, and a sheet of flames quickly spread into the baggage compartment, with the help of a strong west wind. So swiftly did it move that there was hardly any warning from smoke before the fire itself was on the crew.

The three hundred passengers, wakened from their sleep, rushed to the bridge in panic, having quite lost their heads. Many scenes of horror were enacted.

Before the advancing flames women and children shrieked in helpless terror.



The captain having announced that the ship would sink in five minutes, the lifeboats were launched immediately. Women and children embarked first.

During these scenes of horror, a strange incident occurred below decks. A young Englishman, Lord E——, seized a capstan bar and tried by main force to rush into the flames where the chests and boxes were already burning fiercely.

Having knocked down the lieutenant and one of the boatswain's mates who tried to stop him, he had to be restrained by no fewer than six sailors who rushed on him and wrestled him to the ground. He seemed to be in an absolute frenzy to throw himself into the flames.

In the middle of his struggles, he shouted that he wanted to save from the flames a chest containing an object so precious that he offered the enormous sum of *a hundred thousand guineas to anyone who would help him save it from the inferno*. But that was absolutely impossible, and would have been useless in any case, since the lifeboats were barely adequate to hold the passengers and the crew.

Because of his extraordinary strength, he had to be bound hand and foot, and carried, unconscious, into the last of the lifeboats, whose occupants were picked up about six in the morning by the French packet *Redoubtable*.

The first lifeboat, filled largely with women and children, unfortunately capsized, with a loss of seventy-two lives. The following is a partial listing of these unhappy victims.

(Followed an official list, one of the first names of which was that of Miss Emma-Alicia Clary, lyric artist.)

Edison flung the paper violently aside. Five minutes passed, while he brooded in silence. With a gesture he abruptly turned off all the lamps and began to pace restlessly up and down in the darkness.

Suddenly a bell rang on the Morse receiver; at once the electrician switched on the light next to his telegraph machine.

Three seconds later, snatching the message from the machine, he read the following words:

LIVERPOOL TO MENLO PARK, NEW JERSEY, UNITED STATES. FEB. 17, 8:40 A.M. EDISON, ENGINEER: MY FRIEND, ONLY THE LOSS OF HADALY LEAVES ME INCONSOLABLE — I GRIEVE ONLY FOR THAT SHADE. FAREWELL. — LORD EWALD

Throwing aside the telegram, the great inventor dropped to a chair beside his apparatus. As he looked idly about, his glance encountered,



not far from him, the ebony table; a beam of moonlight fell whitely on that charming arm, on the pale hand with its enchanted rings. And the melancholy dreamer, losing himself in unknown thoughts, lifted his eyes to look through the open window out into the night. There for some time he listened to the indifferent winds of winter, whistling and howling through the bare branches — then, raising his eyes even higher toward the ancient luminous spheres that still shone, unmoved, through the gaps in the heavy clouds, and sent their glints forever through the infinite, inconceivable mystery of the heavens, he shivered — no doubt, from the cold — in utter silence.

---

Originally published as *L'Eve future* (1886).



# **La Faëenza**

by Jean Moréas

---

Translated by Rachel Ashton

Introduction

by Françoise Meltzer



# *Fatal Attraction Redux:* “La Faënza”

by Françoise Meltzer

The year 1886 was a busy one on the French literary scene. Victor Hugo had died just one year earlier, and it was perhaps the disappearance of this great literary patriarch that made way for open wars between literary factions and for new literary schools and subschools. There was, to begin with, a sudden plethora of literary journals, many of which were dedicated to the subtle but, for their contributors, extremely significant distinction between “decadent” and “symbolist.” Journals, manifestos, reviews, and declarations all competed at contradicting each other in formulating the precise meaning of, and differences between, symbolism and decadence. Despite their often-heated exchanges and controversies, however, these journals had in common an insistent call for a literary revolution. They also followed on the heels of, and were in several cases directly inspired by, the “Manifeste du Symbolisme,” which appeared in the literary supplement of *Figaro* in September of the same year.

The manifesto was written by Jean Moréas, a writer of Greek origin who had changed his name from Papadiamantopoulos. After a childhood in his native Athens, he spent some time in Germany. His work is discernibly influenced by *Lieder*, and the topography of the Rhineland can often be found in his descriptions. He settled in Paris in 1882 and became aligned with the “decadent” school through his poems *Les Syrtes* (1884). He was to later become the co-founder, with Charles Maurras, of the *école romane*, a neoclassical movement that turned to the greco-roman tradition for its inspiration. But in 1886, Moréas was part of the decadent literary avant-garde. He proposed the term “symbolist” because “decadence” had been largely used by hostile critics to describe the kind of writing of which the young Moréas approved (he was to change a great deal, as already noted, during his literary career and would later come to detest the very kind of writing he was at this time supporting). *Symbolist* was a term that he was in fact to define more fully only about a year later. The manifesto itself created at least as much controversy as it intended to eradicate. An irate René Ghil claimed that symbolism meant nothing but decadence and



attacked Moréas's choice of terms.<sup>1</sup> Many members of the avant-garde literary scene at the time (who were dubbed "decadents" by more traditional critics and authors) resented Moréas's apparent takeover and the arrogance (as they saw it) with which he assumed he could speak for them. Moreover, for many of the "decadent" writers at the time, there was in fact a genuine form of decadence that consisted in the mindless imitation of canonical texts (an imitation that, it should be added, describes much of the drama and verse in nineteenth-century France, at least until Hugo and Baudelaire). Many of these young poets, for example, saw their project as a renaissance, a *modernité* that was replacing dogma and doctrine with liberty and innovation: all the more reason for them to take offense at Moréas's formulation of a symbolist orthodoxy and his incorrect usage, as they saw it, of the term "decadent." Still others, such as Verlaine, *liked* the term "decadent" ("all glistening with purple," he mused happily) and did not wish to see it supplanted by another, especially one as insipid, in their view, as "symbolism."

Moreover, even those close to Moréas agreed that his "Manifeste" said nothing of real import and was very reminiscent (to put it charitably) of Mallarmé. Symbolist poetry, wrote the young Moréas with conviction, "seeks to clothe the Idea with a perceptible form that is nevertheless not in itself the goal."<sup>2</sup> The vagueness of the abstractions, and use of a sartorial metaphor much favored by Mallarmé, did nothing to dispel the impression that not much was being said and certainly nothing new being divulged.

Then there was the matter of style. For "symbolism," wrote Moréas, style must be both archetypal and complex. This is confusing enough as a dictum, but it gets worse. The good symbolist must produce the following in his revolutionary prose: "unpolluted vocables, a passage that buttresses alternating with a passage of undulating decay, significant pleonasms, mysterious ellipses, suspended anacoluthons, every strong and multishaped trope; and finally, the beautiful — reinstated and modernized — the good and luxuriant and spirited French language." To all of this, Anatole France replied, in the literary supplement of *Le Temps* some ten days later, "Ah yes, my dear Mr. Moréas, you have lovely secrets, your verse will be marvelous. But it will be incomprehensible. You will create an unknown masterpiece."<sup>3</sup>

Moréas's response to France, in one of the many new journals, this one aptly called *Le Symboliste*, was even more enthusiastic and incomprehensible. His further attempt at explication led the critic D'Orfer, for one, to retort that, in his humble opinion, an utter inaccessibility to



"modest citizens" was not a principal merit of great literature.<sup>4</sup>

But Moréas believed, at the time, that the revolution in literature that he was championing was to be expressed by a concomitant revolution in French prose. Prose and poetry, he believed, were in any case beginning to move in similar directions and their distinction was increasingly (and, in his view, rightfully) blurred. A "symbolist novel" might be imagined, he claimed, but it would be unlike any realist story by Hugo or Balzac. What counted above all, argued Moréas, was that the "symbolist novel" be polymorphous, by which he meant

sometimes a single character moves in surroundings which are misshapen by his own hallucinations, his temperament: in such a deformation lies the *real*. . . . Thus disdainful of the puerile Method of Naturalism . . . the symbolist novel will edify its products with a *subjective* deformity, relying on this axiom: that art will look to the *objective* only as an extremely limited point of departure.<sup>5</sup>

This passage, which sounds remarkably like the surrealists, who were to follow just a few decades later, is the clearest statement Moréas was to make on his "revolution." Unlike naturalism, the symbolist movement discarded objectivity as indicative of any genuine reality. The subjective vision, with all its apparent "deformities," is seen as a far more accurate account of life. (One also thinks here of the visual equivalent of such a perspective in the art of roughly the same period, impressionism.) But such an emphasis on the individual and his visions is not to be confused with the solipsism of a romantic text. The insistence on deformity is the crucial point here. Moréas wants the deformity of consciousness (hallucinations, for example, or absinthe-inspired visions) to be mirrored in that of the language ("significant pleonasms," "mysterious ellipses," "suspended anacoluthons"). The revolt is not merely against the objectivist musings of naturalism, with its notion of consciousness as a combination of chemical molecules and environmental accident. Moréas's call for a "new" prose is also a farewell to Hugo and all that his classical, clear, bourgeois style was seen to represent. Symbolist prose was still to be French, of course — but "reinstated and modernized."

Something a bit more complicated is found in all this as well: Moréas is assuming *deformity* to be the essence of the individual. If the point of the hunchback of Notre Dame was (among, admittedly, many others) that physical imperfection is not the externalization of a twisted soul, for Moréas it is deformity that is to be sought, sung, and



even cultivated as the only genuine "real." To make his point, Moréas appended an example of symbolist prose to his "Manifeste": a short, fictional piece that displayed the "subjective deformation" he was calling for. The piece (which defies translation) pointedly (and constantly) has recourse to a great many pleonasms, mysterious ellipses, and even suspended anacoluthons. It describes a land so bizarre and fantastic that the other character (whose name is Vondervotteimittiss) asks the protagonist (Fortunato) of which fabled land he could be speaking. "Of the Boulevard des Italiens," replies the latter. When Vondervotteimittiss points out that the description of this busy and famous Parisian street is false ("votre peinture est *fausse* de tout point"), Fortunato emits a symbolist dictum, all italicized in the text: "*the objective is mere semblance, mere vain appearance which is mine to change, transmute, or obliterate as I see fit.*"<sup>6</sup> "Deformity" here means that each individual lens produces a myopic perspective that is more telling, and more accurate, than any universal picture.

But to demonstrate how close decadence and symbolism were, one can point to the fact that Verlaine, in this same year of 1886, also wrote a piece in which he recounted his dreams of walks through Paris. That piece, moreover, was published in *Le Décadent*, the rival journal to *Le Symboliste*. As Guy Michaud was to note, "Decadence and symbolism were not two schools, as one is generally led to think, but two successive phases of one and the same movement, two stages in the poetic revolution."<sup>7</sup>

In any case, this disdain for the external world shared by both decadence and symbolism is echoed by a similar disdain for everyday life. For Moréas, deformity is privileged as the purview of the symbolist writer, and at many levels: syntactic, stylistic, epistemological, and ideological. The individual lives his "reality" as a deformation both because his is a "modern," heightened consciousness and because daily life itself is too mean, too petty and lower class, to be looked at directly (or at all). As Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axël* put it, "Let our servants do our living for us."<sup>8</sup>

*La vie moderne*, then, in Baudelaire's terms, is defined as deformity, as the consciousness of excess and hypersubjective visions. Small wonder that this "symbolist" doctrine is often confused with "decadence," even by the critics of the day. Decadence itself, as evidenced, for example, in J.-K. Huysmans's novel *Against Nature* (published in 1884, and called the "breviary of decadence" by critics of the day), was equally fascinated with excess and subjective musings. (*Against Nature's* protagonist, Des Esseintes, after all, sits in a bath of saltwater and looks



at pictures of the beach. Such an experience, he decides, is finally no different from actually going to the beach, since all that remains after both incidents is the vague memory of similar sights and smells.)

Although Huysmans's prose does not mirror the excesses of its descriptions and story, he does depict modern life as nothing but deformity. Indeed, in spite of his endless effusions and ornate descriptions, Huysmans's novel in particular, and decadent prose in general, does not undertake the sort of wrenching linguistic experiments — deformities of style — that Moréas insists on as the hallmark of symbolism.

Moréas's notion of the deformed also resides in an obsessive fascination with technology. Baudelaire (the acclaimed hero and inspiration for both decadents and symbolists) had already sung of the corruption, swarming crowds, and industrialization of the city. Beginning around the time of Baudelaire, the new technology is seen as omnipotent, artificial, capable of creating anything, and of outdoing Nature at her own game, as it is frequently put. As such, technology achieves both the destruction of the city and the possibility of its continuance; the dismantling of natural secrets and the demonstration of the human mind's overwhelming power. This was a century, after all, which invented the use of electricity, postulated the theory of infectious disease, and produced Lamarck and Darwin, the Eiffel Tower, the efficient use of the locomotive, and photography, to name just a few scientific and technological accomplishments. Of what was science incapable? Nothing, it seemed. Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* is interested in creating hot-house flowers more beautiful than natural ones. Technology, in other words, will surpass and perhaps even replace nature. *Against Nature* contains a famous passage in which Des Esseintes compares a woman to the "sleek new locomotive," with the locomotive winning on every level, including sensuality and femininity.

The connection between women and technology has been amply noted by present-day critics.<sup>9</sup> And certainly the interest in automata — a wonderful combination of precisely these two if ever there was one — was already prevalent in Mozart's time, when watchmakers began creating animated mechanical dolls. Freud's essay on the "Uncanny," after all, is inspired by a short story by E.T.A. Hoffmann, in which a young man falls in love with an automaton, an Olympia who has clear eyes and repeats everything he says. Things get complicated when a real young woman, Clara, begins to resemble the automaton and the protagonist goes mad. Freud's interest is, however, not precisely in the feminization of the lovely automaton but rather in what exactly causes the feeling of uncanniness in the story. It is not, he decides,



“intellectual uncertainty” (a claim made by E. Jentsch, one of Freud’s contemporaries) but castration anxiety.<sup>10</sup>

Two years after Moréas’s manifesto, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam published his last novel, *The Future Eve* (included in this volume), which is about a female automaton — a speaking robot created by Edison and named “Hadaly.” Other novels featuring women as machines of destruction flourished. This period of decadence and symbolism, in other words, produces its famous femmes fatales not only in the guise of a Salome, or Medusa, or Delilah, or Medea. It is a period in which technology is ambivalently depicted as virile (the mind of man at its zenith) and feminine (locomotives or automata can outdo women as sexual, feminized beings).

As Andreas Huyssen has noted, the confusion of women and machines is, as I have also been suggesting, a constant trope in the nineteenth century. For Huyssen, such a blurring has to do with the (bourgeois) male desire to control women, particularly in this period, in which many (largely bourgeois) women were actively campaigning and protesting for their rights as human beings. Certainly, a desire to control such a new unleashed force must be at least part of the explanation — one also describing in part the recognition of technological power, another potentially deadly (and unknown) force.<sup>11</sup> But one can be more precise, I think, with the specifically fin-de-siècle notion of women.

Let us agree with Huyssen that the entire nineteenth century in France, for example, exhibits the tendency to combine machines and women in a trope for the sake of controlling women; and with Elaine Showalter and Rita Felski that such a trope is motivated by the fear of “New Women.” To these arguments, I would add that, beginning with Baudelaire and culminating in the period under examination here, women are simultaneously feared and envied precisely because they are seen as part of the very economy of deformity with which symbolists and decadents align themselves. The deformation for which Moréas calls is not merely one of subjective visions, or of absinthe, or even stylistic eccentricities. He is interested in the deformities of the psyche — the most devastating personification of which, of course, is the female mind. In this period, in which gynophobia reaches a hysterical pitch, woman will herself be seen as a monster, a human being who is by definition a deformity, an aberration, because she does not belong to the norm, which is male.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, she is the depraved devouress who destroys men precisely because she is too close to real nature and thus unpredictable, potentially deadly, and prey to atavistic behavior. Man, on the other hand, is on the side of technology — at



once scientific, logical, and civilized (his base instincts repressed).<sup>13</sup> Conversely, however, woman is reminiscent of technology for the reasons given earlier: she is a bridled force that is not quite human possessing as-yet-unknown powers. Hence the fin-de-siècle obsession with women and the misogyny with which they are depicted. Perhaps such a paradox accounts for the feminized representations of writers and symbolists themselves (e.g., as dandies); not only because they are being rejected by a homophobic bourgeois culture, but also because they identify with deformity, in all of the ways it was understood at the time.<sup>14</sup> One of these ways is as “woman.”

Indeed, woman can be a machine run wild, or a machine can be a better, more subjugated, and efficient woman. When she is not depicted in such supernatural terms, however, she is deformed in a more class-oriented, “natural” way. She is low-class, insane, or “fallen” (or all these); she obeys the call of nature. She stands in the way of culture, aesthetics, and even (as Freud was to argue in *Civilization and Its Discontents*) civilization. Woman, like the Jew or the homosexual, is marginalized in the very bourgeois culture that Moréas’s deformities seek to counter. With this cautionary note about the ambiguous stature of women in this context, let us turn to Jean Moréas’s “La Faëenza.”

The short story first appeared in the November and December 1883 issues of the journal *La Lutèce*. It was then published as part of a collection of stories in July 1886, the same eventful year of the “Manifeste.” The collection, *Le Thé chez Miranda*, was coauthored by Moréas and his friend and symbolist comrade-at-arms, Paul Adam. It should be noted that Moréas never worked with Adam again. Moréas said publicly that he could not understand why Adam “was never able to learn to write. And yet I collaborated with him.”<sup>15</sup> The original 214-page edition, published by the somewhat risqué Tresse and Stock, contained twelve short stories of alternating authorship. The stories are told in the context of six evenings (*soirées*) spent with the mysterious Miranda, who is the “frame” for the tales. In a kind of reverse *Thousand and One Nights* motif, the men tell Miranda stories to maintain her interest. Miranda herself is described as being “unsexed” (*insexuée*), bloodless (*exsangue*), neither woman nor fairy, evanescent. The book is filled with overrich interiors like those of *Against Nature*: a dislike for “real,” everyday life, subjective deformities galore, a blurred distinction between prose and poetry (each *soirée* is preceded by a prose poem), and a style in which every aspect of the French language is distorted with relentless (and occasionally hilarious) consistency. The book’s famous first line — “It is the hiemal night and its mists and sweet comas



..." — was cited throughout Paris by the decadents *and* the conservatives (who detested both decadents and symbolists and saw little difference between them) as proof that the symbolists had lost their collective minds and were no literary force with which to be reckoned. On this last point, they were wrong, overall. Nevertheless, the stories are hard to read, in large part because of their style. It was Moréas's coauthor Adam who had claimed that "art is the work of inscribing dogma into a symbol." These stories certainly attempt to fulfill that dictum.

It is a sign of the times that critics, when *Le Thé chez Miranda* appeared, seemed exclusively interested in the mysterious Miranda. The style itself, meanwhile, created a real scandal (precisely what the authors intended). Modern critics, however, see these stories as important mainly for the glimpse they provide of Moréas himself (Paul Adam having fallen into relative oblivion). "A failure," concludes the critic Robert Jouanny in considering the book, "but a singularly instructive one."<sup>16</sup> The instruction, however, has to do with the life of Moréas.

Here, then, is the famous *roman symboliste* that Moréas would call for officially a few months later with the appearance of the "Manifeste." *Le Thé chez Miranda* contains all the required elements: the blurring of prose and poetry, the revolutionary style, the disdain for everyday life and the reality it embodies, the emphasis on dreams and fantasies, and a constant recourse to a concept of deformity (deformity of classical order and lines, of high French literary style, of bourgeois life, of aesthetic assumptions, of the psyche itself). Miranda herself fulfills all the fantasies concerning women: androgynous, unsexed, sensual, bored, and potentially deadly.

Adam's six stories are banal and occasionally grisly accounts of murder by love, suicide, daydreams, the seduction of a minor, and so on. Moréas's stories are equally banal and are in themselves memorable today only because their author remains canonical. My purpose here is neither to argue for the literary merits of these stories (for they are slim) nor to "rehabilitate" them by claiming their importance as autobiography. Rather, the collection as a whole, and "La Faënza" in particular, are significant because they articulate the fin-de-siècle poetics of pathology, within which "woman" serves as the most successful symbol of deformity.<sup>17</sup>

If, as many critics have noted, the vocabulary in "La Faënza" is falsified by the demands of the symbolist doctrine, it is nevertheless true that the story's dizzying array of arcane terms, neologisms, colloquialisms (e.g., the color *caca d'oie*), slang, and heavy-handed sarcasm combine to befuddle and at times simply irritate the reader. Despite



these sylistic acrobatics, however, the story is a cliché with a few symbolist titillations thrown in — primarily, one suspects, for the purpose of shocking the bourgeois reader who might have ventured into this literary turf. (Indeed, the erratic style prefigures dada and its agenda of shocking the conformists.) It should not be forgotten that this entire movement of literary experimentation and avant-garde radicality includes a relatively small number of writers and their admirers. As Jean Pierrot points out, the constraints of bourgeois respectability in fin-de-siècle France (and late Victorian England) were increasing, not diminishing, at this time. Symbolism, he argues, can be seen as the “revenge of the imagination” against just such an increase in conformism. It is thus no surprise that the themes of symbolist texts included homosexuality, sadism, sadomasochism, and incest. *Le Thé chez Miranda* added a bit of bestiality, but the story that concerns us here is about incest.

The story fits into the tradition of *Manon Lescaut*, or Balzac's *A Harlot High and Low*, or Colette's *Chéri* novels, to name just a few. “La Faënza” is the pretentious name given to a courtesan who is actually from the provinces of central France and has led, with all of her sixteen years, an existence even more banal than that of Emma Bovary. But then she goes to Paris and (inevitably, out of indolence) becomes a *demimondaine*, and one of the most sought-after at that. Much of the tale is spent in a great deal of description, detail after detail concerning La Faënza's wardrobe, furnishings, carriage and livery, and general surroundings — all paid for by lovers only too happy to spend a fortune on the toast of Paris.

Naomi Schor has noted that, in Western culture, women are pejoratively linked to detail and ornament.<sup>18</sup> It is almost as if the very atavistic nature of “woman,” her animalistic excesses, appetites, and lack of control, were masked with the most exquisite finery, laces, objects, and materials produced by the same bourgeois culture that condemned her. Thus, as in the story that follows, the luxury and ornate interiors enveloping women make the unmasking of their “true” nature all the more of a jarring contrast: no matter how beautiful and refined her surroundings, woman is always finally a beast. Beneath the taffetas, silks, and embroideries lies the monster waiting to pounce. The elaborate passages describing La Faënza's luxurious life serve principally to prepare the reader for the unveiling of the horror that she is beneath her finery.

While middle-class women were encouraged to decorate themselves and their houses as a way of keeping busy in the private sphere, the



courtisan wore the influence and wealth of her lovers in public.<sup>19</sup> The courtisan is thus all display, but what she reveals has little to do with herself; she is like a *tabula rasa* on which men imprint their own power, wealth, and desire. She is the mark of indolence in a *fin-de-siècle* culture that has as one of its mottos, "Let us work to be useful," for her laziness is what has made her succumb to such an easy attainment of wealth and a life of ease. It should be remembered at this point that there were few choices available for middle- or lower-middle-class girls from the provinces arriving in Paris. They could work as domestics in wealthy households (an occupation that frequently included its own dangers to chastity), or they could become prostitutes.<sup>20</sup> The drudgery and meager existence that resulted from the first choice made the second an increasingly attractive alternative for many poor young women. Such a choice led the pathologist P. C. H. Brouardel to remark to a young Freud studying in Paris, "Dirty knees are the sign of an honest woman."<sup>21</sup> *La Faënza*, however, never even considers drudgery as a viable alternative. But she is, it will be recalled, a fictional character invented by a male imagination.

As one reads this story, it should be kept in mind that certain male fantasies concerning the feminine appear with such matter-of-fact constancy that they are almost, paradoxically enough, invisible. For example, *La Faënza*'s son, manly and brave in the army, becomes feminized by a kind of paralyzing indolence when he lives with his mother. Vampirelike, she saps him not only of his virility but also of his moral fiber and even his ability to hold down a job. His phallic gesture (with his military sword) at the conclusion is his return to virility, which the text makes identical with the morality of civilized man: he slays the Medusa who had immobilized him, kills Delilah before she can cut more hair, and so on. *La Faënza*'s movements from a life of ill repute (high-class prostitution) to respectability for her son's sake and then back to unbridled sexuality are mirrored by appropriate changes in dress, makeup, and even furniture. Her increasingly uncontrollable sexual appetite at the end is signaled by an increasingly elaborate (if revealing) wardrobe. If her *toilette* and makeup are masks, her pose as a respectable widow is described as equally theatrical, even if outwardly more subtle.<sup>22</sup> *La Faënza*'s chastity results in a frenzied horniness that even the specter of incest cannot quench — the veneer of civilization covering women cracks inevitably when they are barred from "natural" (read *atavistic*) drives. Finally, one might recall the bon mot of Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*: a man has distance; he is the observer, not the observed. In this story, as in most others of this period, the woman



is an object to be observed and studied; she is not a subject. *La Faënza* is viewed from the outside; she is never in a subject position and has little or no agency (she is controlled by her gender at every level — social, biological, political). While such is generally the case for women in Western culture, the fin de siècle was particularly misogynistic in its depiction of “woman,” to a degree, in fact, that critics refer to the “rehabilitation” of women in the decade following this period.

In conclusion, we might note that, with all of Moréas’s bravado about deformity and shocking the complacency of the bourgeoisie, “*La Faënza*” participates in precisely such a view: the story plays on an upper-class, bourgeois reader (who is sophisticated and therefore from Paris) who readily accepts the initial equation of the story, woman equals deformity. The narrator and reader look in dismay as a woman falls prey to her inherent nature, victimizing her son such that he can neither participate in the work ethic nor retain his manhood. The danger of the female of the species is made more than clear. But the danger to what, finally? To a social order the subtext does not wish to destabilize. “*La Faënza*” demonstrates the symptoms of a pathological gynophobia, one that barely masks the desire to maintain the existing patriarchal power structure and the bourgeois respectability Moréas professes to mock. As such, “*La Faënza*” is a fascinating document of an overt reaction formation (in Freud’s sense). The pathological model (extreme gynophobia) informing the text is constantly destabilized by a contradiction: deformity is good, woman is a deformity, woman is bad but endlessly compelling. “*La Faënza*” provides a string of fin-de-siècle clichés: misogynist allegories and class myths that are overt to the point of being programmatic. The clichés themselves have hardly left us (*viz.* the popularity of movies containing violence against seductive women — e.g., the infamous *Fatal Attraction* [1987], directed by Adrian Lyne), but late-twentieth-century culture makes more of an effort at camouflaging them and denying their endurance. All the more reason to turn to “*La Faënza*” for a good look at the unexpurgated version of male cultural fantasies.



## NOTES

1. For a fairly detailed description of the infighting among critics which ensued, see Louis Marquèze-Povey, *Le Mouvement décadent en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986). It is worth noting, as Marquèze-Povey does, that critics have largely ignored these theory skirmishes and yet have consistently referred to "l'Ecole" of symbolism.

All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own. Throughout this essay, I use the term "woman" to mean (mainly) white, European, turn-of-the-century. I frequently use the term (ironically, of course) in the essentialist manner it implies. Scare quotes are to be imagined throughout.

2. "... for the essential character of symbolist art consists in refusing to go as far as the conception of the idea in itself ..." (from "Crise de vers," in *Mallarmé: Oeuvres complètes* [Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961], p. 368).

3. Anatole France, *Le Temps*, Supplement littéraire (September 26, 1886). I would add that it is probably precisely because Moréas's native tongue was not French that he was particularly sensitive to word plays and able to make (and see) unusual combinations that left the more traditionalist writers horrified. More recently, Vladimir Nabokov was able to produce just such innovative word combinations (although more palatable to the average reader) in English. Nabokov always claimed that his native Russian helped him to "experience" English more freshly than the (jaded) native speaker.

4. Marquèze-Povey, *Le Mouvement décadent*, p. 216.

5. Cited by Robert A. Jouanny, *Jean Moréas, écrivain français* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, Minard, 1969), p. 342. Emphases are Moréas's.

6. Jouanny, *Jean Moréas*, p. 343.

7. Guy Michaud, *Message poétique du symbolisme* (Paris: Nizet, 1961), p. 234. Even Edmund Wilson, for example, in *Axel's Castle*, consistently confuses — and/or blurs — the two movements. Such a blurring says more about the proximity of the two "movements" than it does about Wilson's criticism. As many critics have noted of late, symbolism is the latter, less pessimistic, stage of decadence. See *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870 to 1930* (New York: Scribner, 1959).

8. This aspect of symbolism (and/or decadence) is brilliantly explicated in Wilson's outdated but wonderful *Axel's Castle*.

9. See, e.g., Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Penguin, 1990), esp. ch. 9, "Decadence, Homosexuality, and Feminism."

10. Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London, 1953-74), vol. 17, p. 230.

11. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

12. Showalter's theory is that the advances made by women, their suffrage groups, and the "New Woman" who ensued, combined to make men particularly afraid of



women. Indeed, as Showalter notes, antiwomen authors abound in France at this time: Georges Donen, Albert Cim, Maurice Barrès. Many of these authors were also anti-Dreyfus, an unsurprising fact.

13. Rita Felski also talks of the "New Woman" who frightened men at this time. See "The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch," *PMLA* 106.5 (October, 1991). Felski shows how the "feminization of male avant-garde texts" is one way in which what she sees as gender blurring occurs at the fin de siècle.

14. One iconic representation of such an ambivalence is the photograph of Oscar Wilde dressed as Salome, sometime in the 1890s. The picture is in Richard Ellmann's biography of Wilde, entitled *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 429.

15. Cited in R. Niklaus, *Jean Moréas, poète lyrique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1936), p. 174n.

16. Jouanny, *Jean Moréas*, p. 337.

17. See Bram Dijkstra's wonderful *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1986).

18. Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

19. See, e.g., Remy G. Saisselin, *Bricabracomania: The Bourgeois and the Bibelot* (London: Thames, 1985).

20. See Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

21. Preface to the German translation of J.G. Bourke's *Scatologic Rites of All Nations* (1891), in Freud, *The Standard Edition*, vol. 12, p. 335.

22. A modern version of such sartorial changes for the sake of subjugating men is to be found, e.g., in the movie *Black Widow* (1987), directed by Bob Rafelson.



# LA FAËNZA

by Jean Moréas

## I

DENIZENS OF HIGH society called her by the Italianized name, La Faënza, because of her complexion, which seemed bronzed by the Neapolitan sun, and her big black pupils, which would strike you down at the crossroads, like blunderbusses in the thickets of Abruzzi. Yet she was born in the department of l'Inde-et-Loire, where she was married at barely sixteen to a certain Verdal, an honorable attorney in his fifties, who left her, after fourteen months of marriage, a widow with a small boy on her hands and a very problematic financial situation. Some time later, weary of this melancholy and monotonous provincial existence, haunted by dreams of luxury and easy pleasure, she consented to go to Paris with a dismissed subprefect, who soon abandoned her in order to marry the daughter of a rich shopkeeper on the Rue Sentier.

As her twenty years had just dawned, and her great titillating eyes stole everyone's heart, and her hair, while not reaching her ankles, must have dropped down below her round and dancing hips, she lacked few opportunities to throw to the winds the little of her propriety that remained by frequenting fashionable inns. She was immediately quoted highly in the stock market of love, and respectable madams, who so profitably traffic in white slavery right under the noses of the police, offered her some first-class speculations. Soon every man of leisure fleeing the gallows, every boyar in the process of squandering his land, every foreign adventurer, and every philosopher of gambling having a few claims on his peers' respect, courted the honor of placing fistfuls of louis on the pink marble of the mantelpiece in her bedchamber. She had her apartment, just like an actress, with a salary of eleven hundred francs, valets in short trousers, and unbelievably corpulent coachmen.

Then began for the beautiful La Faënza a spell of magnificence that lasted for more than ten years. It was the commonplace story of every pretty girl who is thrown onto the Parisian streets with very few scruples and a generous chest. She obtained ruinously expensive outfits, extrava-



gant hats, Oriental fabrics in her parlor that would make a shah leer, and in her boudoir jewel-edged Venetian mirrors in which she could admire the majestic curves of her hips. She even had wit, that so-called Parisian wit that comes from sucking prawns in the insipid atmosphere of private dining rooms. Pretentious, elegant young men, eager to win their spurs, and aging pleasure seekers, jealous of the reputation they had won, quarreled over which one of them would have the glory of paying her dressmaker's bills, her villas in Nice, and her country cottages in Normandy. In a word, in the midst of all her exhilarating victories, she came up unawares against that miserable age of obstinate wrinkles, loose teeth, and hair that sadly falls away like autumn leaves. As a matter of fact, she had full right not to fear, for, in spite of her thirty-four years, her skin was perfectly smooth and marmoreal, her teeth were insolently white, and from her charming Giorgione virgin's head fell cascades of hair able to defy even the most murderous of combs.

Bear in mind that La Faënza had a son from her marriage. This child was brought up by an elderly aunt. His mother saw him once when he was eight years old, then she thought of him only to send him a little money and letters full of that false sentimentality common to all prostitutes. The elderly aunt, wishing to hide from the son the behavior of his mother, had him enlisted in an African regiment, where he became a noncommissioned officer at the age of nineteen. Having distinguished himself in the latest rebellion, he was awarded a medal, but unfortunately his wounds compelled him to leave the army. At this news, La Faënza felt seized by a sudden, immeasurable maternal affection, and she resolved to give up the sweet pleasures of salaried love in order to devote the rest of her life to the happiness of this abandoned child. Having sold her apartment, her jewels, and her carriages and horses, she retired to Touraine to a property formerly offered her by a right-wing member of Parliament. That is how the beautiful La Faënza became Mme Verdal again, widow of an honest attorney, an exemplary mother, and a pious and charitable lady.

## II

Philippe was a handsome young man of nineteen or twenty, with a fine mustache, a dainty figure, and dovelike eyes. Hardly suspecting the past of his mother, who invented thousands of ingenious lies to explain their lengthy separation, he began to adore her with all the fervor of a heart that had until then remained closed to familial effusions. La Faënza, for her part, was literally madly in love with her son, her handsome Philippe.



The property where the ex-courtesan resolved to expiate her pretty sins was a charming villa with green shutters around which morning glory and nasturtiums with bloodred calyxes crawled like reptiles. A small grove growing aimlessly enveloped it in the exquisite mystery of fleeting shadows. In its most obscure nook, under the umbrella of a great polonia, the warbling of woodpeckers mingled with the tinkling of water pouring from a nymph's urn into the little marble pool covered with moss and yellow lichen.

Mother and son led a pleasant and peaceful life there for several months. They made a fuss over each other, at times verging on the ridiculous, with excessive affections interspersed with mock sulks. La Faënza had completely forgotten her former existence: stands at the races and boxes at the theater, horse rides in the Pyrénées and yacht outings at Trouville, and dinner parties in her splendid mansion in Parc Monceau, theater suppers at fashionable restaurants, where carafes of champagne and glasses of Chartreuse of all colors made the impossible dandies, whose clothes were absurdly tight, even more ridiculous than usual. She even ended up sincerely believing that she had been a saintly woman all her life.

However, despite all their mutual affection, the intimacy between the mother who has spanked her child and the child who has grown up clinging to his mother's apron strings, that straightforward, carefree intimacy, did not come. And this was perfectly natural. La Faënza had seen her son only once since she ran away with the subprefect, as we know, and at a time when the child was still only a small boy. She was now suddenly seeing him as a grown-up young man with a fearsome moustache and a warlike saber cut on his temple. For the son, his mother was a stranger; one could have said that he was seeing her for the first time. With that, it is easy to explain why they sometimes caught themselves addressing the other formally and being incomprehensibly reserved and needlessly polite in their relations.

Mme Verdal had cast aside La Faënza, the hetaera within her was finally dead. She dressed severely, in black silk dresses trimmed with jade, with very few rings and delightfully modest earrings. She wore her hair coiled closely around her head, and the only makeup she used was good honest face powder. With such behavior and a very sizable private income, her country neighbors could not help but hold her in high esteem.

Among the ex-courtesan's most highly ranking, influential friends must be counted the Mouflet family, consisting of the father, Evariste Mouflet, a former notary and an insipid provincial affected with an



incurable mania for silly jokes; the mother, Olympe, an honest, respectable woman who had only ever taken as lovers her husband's three or four clerks; and their three daughters, who were quite attractive (well, that is, for daughters of a notary).

Mlle Clémentine above all, who was the eldest daughter of the Mouflet household, would have looked extremely attractive, with her slender figure, were it not for those odious greenish yellow vicuña dresses from a boutique in the subprefecture owned by a certain M. Worth. Two wide, startled eyes under a cap of pleasant chestnut hair, and, what is more, a seventeen-year-old chest that seemed to hold many promises.

The ex-courtesan and the notary's family often visited each other's houses to drink cups of tea and play innocuous games and a few out-of-tune arias on the piano. Philippe, who had not learned to be fastidious in matters of appearance in the hunts at Kroumir, found Mlle Clémentine's vicuña dress much to his taste while preferring even more the treasures it concealed. Mlle Clémentine, for her part, did not feel an unconquerable aversion for the brown mustache. Needless to say, every day the Mouflets found new qualities in the only son of a mother who enjoyed a private income of fifty thousand pounds. So they courted honestly, right under La Faënza's nose, without her suspecting a thing.

One evening in July, the entire Mouflet family found themselves gathered in the ex-courtesan's dining room. After a few polkas thumped out by the youngest daughter and some idle gossip, the notary proposed a stroll under the cooling foliage of the garden, given the unbearable heat of the atmosphere. The whole company eagerly accepted.

It was a glorious evening. The full moon was shining like a fantastic twenty-franc piece in the cloudless sky. They separated along the pathways where now and then glowworms lit up in the moss.

La Faënza had been looking for her son for a few minutes when she thought she could make out, on a stone bench in the darkest corner of the garden, two shadows entwined. She stopped, watchful. She could have sworn she could hear the sound of kisses mingling with the splashing of the water falling into the marble basins. Holding her breath, she advanced toward the stone bench, behind a hedge of red rosebushes. Her son Philippe was in the act of murmuring sweet nothings into Mlle Clémentine's ear.

A strange feeling swept through the ex-courtesan's heart. She felt dizzy for a moment, then her pupils dilated, and, choking with anger, drawing herself up to her full height before the poor, totally dumbfounded lovers, she addressed Mlle Mouflet in vicious terms:

She really was stupid not to have noticed for so long that they had



been coming here to steal her son. She wasn't exactly going to give her money away to feed a corrupt notary and his promiscuous daughters. And Mme Mouflet, well, she was a poor sort, sleeping with the servants! Everybody in these parts knew that. All these down-and-outs would do well not to set foot in her house again or she would chase them away with her broom...

Completely forgetting herself in her anger, Mme Verdal became her old wild self and overwhelmed the Mouflet family, who had come running at the sound of this most scurrilous and abusive quarrel.

M. Mouflet led away his wife and his daughters who were frightened to death, after having first replied with an indignant tirade.

Philippe stood there, looking on frantically, not understanding a thing.

La Faënza went home in an indescribable state of exasperation. She wept, sobbed, and rolled on the carpet, foaming at the mouth. Then, suddenly getting up, she set to kissing her son full on the lips, laughing like a madwoman.

### III

After sulking for a few days, mother and son were reconciled with renewed affection. And every day there were long walks in the country, from which they returned like lovers of a bygone age, their hands filled with bunches of bramble. In the morning they went off on horseback for hours on end, into the woods, and in the evening, in the romantic moonlight, they would go and stir the calm waters of a nearby pond in their open boat. Curiously enough, since the scene in the garden, a notable change took place in La Faënza's habits. Breaking with the severe attitude she had adopted since her conversion, she gave up the inelegant frock of an honest woman to sport again the ruinous, gaudy, colored fabrics, ostrich-feathered hats, and long buckskin gloves. The jewels she had not wanted to get rid of were taken out of their crimson velvet boxes to adorn those long, slender hands and regal neck. The face powder was no longer embellishment enough, and she remembered her rejuvenating, subtle makeup and precious scents. She took particular care of her underclothes, aware of all their perfidies: antique lace on silk blouses, pale pink stockings with ribbon rosettes where the fiery facets of diamonds glinted. The modest furniture of her bedroom and her boudoir were totally transformed. Recalling the arousing splendor of her bedroom while she was a courtesan, she surrounded herself with low, soft furnishings that embraced like voluptuous arms Syrian fabrics,



carpets from Karaman, and speckled tiger skins where bare feet wriggled and stretched out to meet resonant kisses. Perfumes burned steadily in richly engraved incense burners, and armfuls of white roses mingled their last exhalation with the warmth from the tree trunks crackling in the towering fireplace.

Her son's appearance concerned her greatly. She would say: that isn't very stylish, or that suits you; that frock coat creases at the back, or this jacket fits you nice and tight. She would part his hair for him and put oil on his mustache just as she did with her fancy men when she was supported by obese financiers.

Sometimes in the evening, at an unseemly hour, she would call him into her bedroom, and there, in the flickering light of the pink candles, her statuesque body barely accommodated by her lawn shift with its bold openings, planting herself right in front of the high mirror of her West Indian hardwood wardrobe, emphasizing her radiant breasts and the impudent curve of her statuesque back, she would say to her son, inciting him with her eyes:

"I'm still beautiful, aren't I! You'd be mad about me if I weren't your mother, wouldn't you?"

Then she would scream with laughter, making her wildcat teeth glint in all their ivory splendor. Nonchalant, embracing, sinuous, and feline, she would come and sit on Philippe's knee, who, his face flushed and unconscious lust in his eye, hardly dared look at her. After twiddling her son's mustache for a few moments, kissing his wan lips and his carefully waved and brilliantined hair, she would roll onto the tiger skin that she used as her bedside rug, munch a few biscuits, drink a glass of port in one gulp, then leap like a gazelle under the *broderie anglaise* sheets, exquisitely closing her glossy lids with their long, curling lashes, saying, with her lips hardly moving:

"Go to bed, sir, it is late and I feel sleepy!"

As for Philippe's poor little heart and his roused nerves, their tranquillity was permanently disturbed. He would often go out before dawn on restive horses, over the plains, without really knowing the aim of his reckless rides, or he would go and shoot wild ducks for days on end in typhoid marshes. Anxious, moody, and irritable, for some time he had been searching for ludicrous reasons to be angry at his mother, saying that this life of leisure was finally exasperating him, that it was shameful for a young man of his age, and that he would *certainly* return to the regiment! Then there were touching scenes, tears, implored apologies, protestations of filial love followed by long caresses and rapturous kisses on the mouth.



## IV

That day, they had dined — one of La Faënza's whims — in the little boudoir draped with mauve satin. The pale and mournful twilight filtered through the panes of the narrow window. La Faënza had said: Let's not light the candles, this twilight is really pleasant. He had held his tongue with a vague frown. The scent of magnolia hung in the heavy air. She lit a Dubèque cigarette, he his foot-soldier's pipe. Nearly ten minutes passed in an embarrassed silence.

La Faënza, without looking away, said:

"Are you anxious?"

"No."

A few more minutes of silence. Suddenly, tensing her limbs in a supreme effort, La Faënza fell to her knees before her son, and, with a furious embrace, she said, in an almost forced manner:

"Philippe, you don't love me!"

He hung his head without replying. Then, she rose with a sudden jolt and walked feverishly around the room. Stopping short, she said in a subdued voice:

"Oh! good heavens, how awful! This must end. Listen to me, Philippe; you know it, you can feel it, I love you. And it isn't a mother's love that I feel for you, but that of a smitten woman, a mistress. Do you understand? Oh! yes, I want you and you will be mine!"

She laughed sneeringly like a madwoman, then she continued:

"I am your mother. Is that all? What of it! Do I really know you? I saw you once when you were seven. You are a stranger, an attractive boy who turned my head... And you don't even desire me! But look at me, I am as beautiful as if I were twenty! But what about morals? Oh! morals! I couldn't care less! Anyway you don't know, your aunt hid everything from you... I was... a kept woman, I was... a tart, as they say! All my wealth, and yours, comes from that... You ought not to pretend to be so scrupulous. We're in the gutter, Philippe, let's stay there..."

He looked at her, dumbfounded. She continued, becoming more and more excited:

"You have seen me dressed in nothing but my chemise, you know I have a magnificent chest that princes would pay its weight in gold for... We shall be very happy, my Philippe. Would you like that? Oh! I *will* love you so, and we will die together... in love..."

She leapt on her son like a maenad, and, sweeping him up in her sinewy arms, she rolled with him onto the couch, breathing her intoxicating breath into his face. He felt lost in a voluptuous torpor. Then,



suddenly, breaking away from this embrace in a desperate effort of will, standing up and tensing the back of his knees, he looked around him frantically.

La Faënza, absolutely beside herself, threw herself onto her son once more. Then, with his face tensed, his mouth terrifyingly contorted, Philippe seized a Japanese dagger whose honed blade was glimmering on a bedside table with bizarre marquetry, and stabbed her violently in the neck.

She fell onto the rug, without a cry, the blood streaming from her.

Originally published as "La Faënza," in *Le Thé chez Miranda* (1886).



# ***Selections***

by Guy de Maupassant

---

Translated by Ernest Boyd

Introduction

by Phillippe Lejeune



# Maupassant and Fetishism

by Philippe Lejeune

This study of fetishism springs from the juxtaposition of two sets of readings, a short story by Guy de Maupassant entitled "The Apparition" (included in this volume) which led me to examine a whole series of other stories in which this perversion appears, and case studies collected by sexologists at the end of the nineteenth century, such as Jean-Martin Charcot and Valentin Magnan in France and Richard von Krafft-Ebing in Germany. The apparent similarity between the texts (the case studies are often framed like Maupassant's short stories: a doctor offers a patient's oral or written autobiography for public perusal and then provides a more or less brief commentary) led me to become aware of their differences. While meticulous, precise, and full of distaste, the sexologists' narratives present us with behavior that remains for them basically impenetrable. On the other hand, Maupassant's stories, no matter how fantastical and lyrical, are clearly inspired by a desire for empathy, and for this reason they seem to be closer in spirit to the interpretation proposed by Freud some twenty years later.

## A Network of Short Stories

"The Apparition" is a fantastic short story that plays on the classic hesitation between two interpretations, one realist (i.e., a story of a man alone in a château in which certain events occur that cannot be explained from this perspective), one supernatural (i.e., a story of an apparition). The revolving door in which the reader is caught is a trap: the supernatural interpretation, like its alternative, implies the narrative's adhesion to reality, yet both interpretations defy plausibility.

The only way to comprehend anything at all is to step back, adhering less to the story than to the text itself, understood here as a symptom or the presentation of a symptom. It is a story of contagion. At the end of the narrative, the Marquis de la Tour Samuel finds himself in exactly the same state in which he was astonished to see his friend at the beginning: the two characters appear to make up different sides of a split personality, each unaware of the other. The marquis has no idea what has made his friend feel so desperate, and when he in turn undergoes the same traumatic experience, he senses its absurdity — a woman who means nothing to him and who comes out of nowhere plaintively



asks him to comb her hair. There must be some connection between the stubborn mourning of one character and the apparition that frightens the other, since the former disappears once he has communicated his terror.

"The Apparition" is a strange story in which communication is difficult: the husband debarred from the gloomy château, secret documents locked in a desk, a letter of introduction that incites mistrust, doors and windows that open and close at inopportune moments like a sieve for the obscure osmosis between two different worlds, and finally the failed double meeting. But at the same time, communication does indeed occur, since husband and wife speak the same language ("I will ask you to render me an important service"; and "Oh! Sir, you can render me a great service!" [pp. 805, 808]) and, once the favor is done, she disappears, leaving the Marquis with the symptom. And perhaps, as in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, the message is perfectly conspicuous. One does not see it at first because it is divided between two experiences (the mourning and the apparition) and because it is formulated in reverse order. All this is very strange indeed; the young bride dies of an affliction of the heart, "killed by love, very probably" (p. 805), reminiscent of Alberte in Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Rideau cramoisi* and of Villiers d'Isle Adam's *Véra*. During the 1870s and 80s, it seems that women were dying of love in earnest. But in "The Apparition" the dead woman is not dead; she comes back to haunt the château, insatiable and in search of appeasement. Indeed, it seems to be the husband who is threatened with death by his wife's stubborn desire.

To convince ourselves of this, and dissipate any anguish in a burst of laughter, we simply have to superimpose "The Apparition" on "A Philosopher," in which Maupassant tells the same story, at times verbatim, but in a suggestive style: a husband, prematurely aged by the erotic fervor of his young wife, manages to escape death only by finding someone to stand in for him. The central scene of "The Apparition" expresses this terror inspired by the other's desire: the Marquis de la Tour Samuel, apparently frigid, is in some way violated by the ghost. A transposition of this scene into sexual terms is easily accomplished — the soothing of pain, the sighs of satisfaction — but one could mistake its tenor, because the sexual relationship is displaced from the genitals to the hair, a displacement peculiar to fetishism. However, in fetishism the desired object is displaced; and in this context it is the desiring object, so to speak. In other words, have we ever seen a boot in love with a fetishist?



We find ourselves, then, faced with a knot of fantasies, inverted, displaced, and grafted onto one another to produce a most mysterious and most fascinating short story. To understand it one must undo the knot, unraveling the threads one by one. I have chosen to follow the thread of fetishism but I will probably come across others along the way, since everything here seems to revolve around the fear of castration. This thread is already apparent in the Belgian chronicle that probably inspired Maupassant to write "The Apparition."<sup>1</sup> But why was he inspired by the story? Did he recognize in it what we, in turn, recognize in other stories he subsequently wrote?

Maupassant's short stories, produced through perpetual variations and combinations of material, which are extensive but nonetheless limited to certain narrative techniques and fantasies, incite the reader to create such links between them. Everyone can wander in their own direction, and the brief journey I have taken does not in any way exclude the others.

The passionate hair that horrifies the hero of "The Apparition" reappears in "The Tresses" (included in this volume). This time, however, it is desired in the normal(!) way. "The Tresses" is presented in the form of a psychiatric case study, just as "A Divorce Case" (included in this volume) will be two years later: at the asylum, or in the courtroom, an autobiographical text (a retrospective narrative or diary) is put forward in which the fetishist retraces his downfall. Why did I begin with "The Apparition," rather than with these two stories? Probably because the Marquis de la Tour Samuel is portrayed as normal: it is the world around him that is going mad. Initially I thought I preferred "Who Knows?" and "During the Night" to Maupassant's other fantastic tales for this same reason. However, the protagonists of these stories harbor a type of deviation closely related to fetishism, a strange displacement in the choice of the loved object. The hero of "Who Knows?" loathes being near living things; he chooses to live in solitude, surrounded by objects and trinkets that fulfill for him the function of a beloved woman. The hero of "During the Night" has a fear of daylight; he asks the night to give him the emotions and the joy that light brings to others. In both cases it turns out badly, as though the very things they are fleeing reappear at the center of their substitutional experiences. The final sentence of "Who Knows?" evokes the conclusion of "La Conscience" in "La Légende des siècles": "The prisons themselves are not safe." Although this point of departure bears a relation to fetishism, the pattern of the obsessional return of the repressed is of much more general significance.



Starting with "The Tresses," it is possible to take another route. Daydreaming about objects that testify to past love brings to mind two earlier short stories, "The Bed" and "Old Objects." This fascination for an object that one feels must conceal a treasure at its core, recalls two other tales that both end in the discovery of a woman's portrait that acts as a magnet for the house in "For Sale" and in "A Portrait" for the owner, the fascinating M. Milial, a true hero of the "family romance" (in the Freudian sense).

Far be it from me, then, to make fetishism a central point of Maupassant's psychological world. Nonetheless, given that a fascination with relics, an association with the tragic structures of obsessional return and a connection to the family romance take up so much space in the stories, fetishism cannot be passed over. However, I will only discuss the short stories in which fetishism is the major subject, "The Tresses" and "A Divorce Case," to which I will later add "The Unknown" (included in this volume) for reasons that will become apparent.

### A Collection of Cases

The idea for this comparison occurred to me as I was perusing, for other reasons entirely, sexology and criminology literature from the end of the nineteenth century. In search of criminal autobiographies, I paged through the *Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale* and the *Archives d'anthropologie criminelle*, read Ambroise Tardieu, Valentin Magnan, Paul Emile Garnier, Alexander Lacassagne, and many others, and reread the "Catalogue de La Redoute" of perversions, and Krafft-Ebing's general survey, *Psychopathia sexualis*. It is immediately apparent that the areas these texts cover are the same as those covered in Maupassant's short stories — crime, rape, incest, parricide, infanticide, sexual perversion, insanity — but from a diametrically opposed point of view. Science at that point was still in a purely descriptive phase, with elaborately detailed inventories and categories of aberrant behaviors, deviations it condemns without a moment of hesitation or self-reflection. Between the doctor and the object of his discourse lies a chasm. Maupassant, on the other hand, adopts a lawyer's strategy: he often chooses the most favorable case and strives to understand it, entering into this world of transgression or perversion with alarmed curiosity, of course, but nevertheless with sympathy. Maupassant is a man of mitigating circumstances, the lawyer who can bring the jurors around by demonstrating that they too could have committed such a crime. We are all murderers. Who would throw the first stone at Renardet, rapist and murderer,



at Rosalie Prudent, child killer, or at the hero of "The Hermit," incestuous father?

Fetishism was one of the last perversions to be described. Homosexuality had fascinated the medical community since the work of the German psychiatrist Westphal, in 1870.<sup>2</sup> However, the first cases of fetishism were not described in France until 1882, by Charcot and Magnan, and the term itself was not proposed until 1887. It was the psychologist Alfred Binet who did so in a subtle examination of two problems that continued to elude specialists in forensic medicine: the almost imperceptible transition from a normal to a pathological state (i.e., a distinction between "minor fetishism," present in most people, and major pathological fetishism) and the origin of the choice of fetish, which Binet traces back to word associations dating from childhood.<sup>3</sup> After 1890 descriptions of fetishism increase in volume. In 1896 Garnier collected his observations in the first book dedicated entirely to the subject. Fetishism in all its varieties was fully described: all that remained was to understand it.

An example that can be compared with Maupassant's "The Tresses" is the first case published in 1890 in the *Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale*. Three doctors report on the mental condition of P——, arrested for having cut off the braids of several young girls. They begin with a solemn declaration: "Every medico-legal study of the mental condition of a person charged or accused must, for fear of being incomplete, rise above the offending deed: to reduce it to the examination of the isolated deed would lead to nothing more than the sterile observation of an action or a series of actions, with its previous history remaining unknown and the appreciation of it not supported by any serious scientific facts."<sup>4</sup>

The authors thus continue methodically and systematically to explore the life of the accused (in Maupassant's stories, by contrast, the heroes reach the threshold of perversion practically unsullied by pasts of any sort). They research the family history for any antecedents (delirium, fever, excitability, depression, and so on) and, sure enough, they find them. They search for childhood illnesses and discover that P—— had certain manias. However, he had been a good student, had several close friends, and no habits of masturbation, etc. They investigate his curriculum vitae: after his apprenticeship he worked in his father's locksmith business. They investigate his love life: he was a timid man. In 1882, he took over his father's business. He made some bad deals, went bankrupt, and then began the series of actions that led to his arrest. For the doctors the case is clear: a hereditary predis-



position, followed by a moral conflict that precipitates his downfall and "gives free reign to perversions and aberrations in the expression of sexual instincts, which find their outlet in action, with contrivances so strange that they confound those who have not actually entered into the study of such anomalies" — and even those who have studied them, one might add. The doctors then describe his arrest, after which sixty-five tresses or braids of hair, cut from as many young girls' heads, were found at his home organized in bundles. Then they reproduce the (oral) account made by the accused in answer to their questions:

For about three years, when I was alone in my room in the evening I would often feel uneasy, beginning with a feeling of anxiety or anguish, a kind of queasiness, and then I would get the urge to touch a woman's hair. I cannot really say how I managed it the first time, but once I had a tress of hair in my hand, I felt such exquisite pleasure that my penis immediately became erect, and, without touching myself and without rubbing up against the girl, I ejaculated. I returned home, ashamed of what had happened; but, when I thought about it again, the same sensations returned, so then the idea occurred to me of possessing the hair to which I owed such sensual pleasure, pleasure that up until then I had not known. I had possessed women before, but I had never felt anything like this with them; they disgusted me more than they attracted me. But as soon as I saw their hair streaming down their shoulders, I became obsessed with the thought of touching it. Soon that was no longer enough. I wanted to possess it, and one evening I cut off a braid with a knife. I took it home with me, clutching it in my hands all the way. When I was in my room, I was seized by the same excitement I had experienced outside. I plunged my hands into that hair, I brushed it all over my body, I enveloped my genitals in it, and I experienced the most vivid sensations. Shattered with exhaustion, I felt ashamed of myself and for several days afterward I dared not go out of the house alone. Sometimes I would remain calm for three or four months, then it would happen again. It excited my desire in the most extraordinary manner, it was like a compulsion, I had to go and touch someone's flowing hair; woman or girl, it did not matter, I did not seek it in advance, and once I had touched it a superhuman force took hold of me. Once I had the hair in my hand nothing could persuade me to let go. When I could, I would cut it off and run away with my hand clenched "on my hair." If something prevented me from approaching, if the woman disappeared into the crowd or boarded an omnibus, I would feel furiously annoyed. I would return home, and then, taking out of the armoire the tresses I had hidden



there, I would comb them and pass my fingers through them. Then I would reach the same excited state as if I had been outside, and I would give myself over to masturbation.

To this account made by P——, the doctors add a series of other syndromes: obsessive collecting, phobias of certain locations, the inability to remember certain people's names. The diagnosis is announced: "A man who manifests such disturbances is ill." Comparing this case with those presented by Charcot and Magnan in 1882, they conclude that such a man is "a degenerate." He can be classified as hereditarily insane; and is thus not punishable. However, society has the right to defend itself from him; conclusion: he must be placed in an asylum.

The irony of my summary is no doubt unjust: it is no great credit to me that, one hundred years after Freud's findings, I believe I understand what escaped these early pioneers. Moreover, they should be credited with the fact that they sought to describe as fully as possible the history and behavior of the patient. It is thanks to their systematic interrogation of P—— that we are able to observe certain details or phrases that did not attract their attention: women "disgusted me more than they attracted me." Why? And what purpose did fetishism serve for him? It would be best here to quote Freud's 1927 response to this question:

When now I announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost. That is to say, it should normally have been given up, but the fetish is precisely designed to preserve it from extinction. To put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and — for reasons familiar to us — does not want to give up.

What happened, therefore, was that the boy refused to take cognizance of the fact of his having perceived that a woman does not possess a penis. No, that could not be true: for if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger and, against that there rose in rebellion the portion of his narcissism which Nature has, as a precaution, attached to that particular organ. . . . It is not true that, after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up. In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome percep-



tion and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached, as is only possible under the dominance of the unconscious laws of thought — the primary processes. Yes, in his mind, the woman *has* got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. But this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute. Furthermore, an aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitals, remains a *stigma indelible* of the repression that has taken place. We can now see what the fetish achieves and what it is that maintains it. It remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it. It also saves the fetishist from becoming a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects.<sup>5</sup>

Was Freud right? The issue of the *Nouvelle Revue de la psychanalyse* devoted to “objects of fetishism” provides a bibliography of all the work this theory has engendered, the shift toward pre-Oedipal explanations, and so on. I will assume here that he was right, my aim being simply to show that the descriptions of fetishism proposed by Maupassant anticipate in their own way Freudian theory. And if Freud was wrong, let us say that Maupassant made the same mistake as he.

### Maupassant's View

First of all, it is necessary to avoid biographical illusion, which reconstructs the lives of writers by ascribing to them certain episodes of their own works of fiction. For example, Maupassant describes a flower fetishist in “A Divorce Case.” Indeed, he did have a greenhouse installed in his apartment on Rue Montchanin, and, in 1890, he waxed lyrical in a letter to Henri Cazalis thanking him for sending him some flowers.<sup>6</sup> But to deduce from this that he was a fetishist is going too far. A fetishist is a man who can only have an erection before the body part or the object to which his desire has been diverted. Everything we know of Maupassant's love life demonstrates, on the contrary, that he was a “red-blooded bull” who could “have an erection at will.”<sup>7</sup> Let us simply acknowledge that he was, in Binet's terminology, “a minor fetishist” like everyone else and that he had a penchant (and why not?) for flowers and for hair.

Another myth holds that he followed Charcot's work assiduously. He was without a doubt interested in Charcot, had attended his



lectures and a few of his presentations of invalids, with or without hypnosis, and had on other occasions visited asylums. But it is very unlikely that he ever read anything by Charcot (whose works on hysteria are highly technical and not readily accessible to laymen), and he talks about him only casually in his chronicles.<sup>8</sup> His knowledge of Charcot was that of a man who read the papers, rather than that of a specialist. It is highly unlikely that he read Charcot and Magnan's 1882 study entitled "Inversions du sens génital" in the *Archives de la neurologie*. The two short stories that present cases of fetishism were written in 1884 and 1886, before Binet's 1887 study and well before the 1890 *Annales d'hygiène publique* descriptions included above. In all likelihood, Maupassant had only a vague knowledge of pathological fetishism: from stories people told, or from the crime columns in newspapers, like those about "braid cutters" that, at the time, according to Krafft-Ebing, were spreading fear throughout the cities of Europe. Nonetheless, these popular accounts were enough to awaken the imagination.

Maupassant's approach is based not on observation (his fetishists are completely idealized poets and philosophers of their perversion) but on imagination. However, it is no less perspicacious for all that since it depends on two questions that the psychiatrists of the time carefully avoided. The first is: What if I were a fetishist? Or rather, What if I *became* a fetishist? One then enters into the perversion through a sort of role playing. From this emerges the second question: "What is the point of fetishism?" Instead of an inquiry into its causes, which generates purely nominal diagnoses (i.e., heredity, degeneracy), Maupassant questions its function. What reasons would I have to become a fetishist? This is the same approach he uses for crime and different forms of madness. He attempts to reconstruct in a logical manner how he could become insane, and constructs a theoretical model that follows the course this takes. All his attention is focused on the transition from the normal to the pathological.

The shift from an inquiry into the causes to an inquiry into the functions evidently brings with it a refusal to consider the historical roots of the perversion in childhood. Maupassant's hero is often a man without a past and without memories. Presented as ordinary, normal, average, he will drift progressively into a pathological state. Such candor, which is that of a patient suffering from symptoms that initially shock him, can perhaps also be seen as an experimental device. Blocking all paths that lead back to derisory explanations, it forces one instead to focus on the internal organization of the perversion.



This method allows him to approach, in practice, what Freud discovered. I do not intend to make Maupassant out to be a prophet. Instead, I will show the extent to which his description of fetishism is idealized. Whatever he knew about the workings of fetishism he never theorized. However, he did write texts that, like Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*, could well have inspired Freud himself.<sup>9</sup>

### Idealized Fetishism

Hair, flowers, antique objects and trinkets: Maupassant's fetishists. have good taste. All this remains within the usual decor of seduction. They love excessively, and exclusively, things that everybody has savored in passing during the course of a love affair. The reader readily accepts their choice. In contrast, I can recall the body parts and the objects on which the first four fetishists, observed by Charcot and Magnan, had fixed their desire: buttocks, nails in women's shoes, nightcaps, and white aprons. Or, remember M. Rabour, with his passion for ladies' boots at the beginning of Octave Mirbeau's *The Diary of a Chambermaid*: it is difficult for the reader to identify with him. Maupassant has avoided the grotesque and the absurd so easily encountered in this context. The objects chosen are socially acceptable, the source of aristocratic daydreams, while the path of fetishism tends to lead in the opposite direction: hence the intense poeticization of the phenomenon. With Maupassant the fetishist text will always be lyrical (even when it verges on the obscene in "A Divorce Case") and never comical (as it is in Michel Tournier's *Le Fétichiste*) or grotesque.

One of the comical elements of fetishism is the fanatical accumulation of identical objects: forty-three pairs of women's boots, nineteen nightcaps, sixty-five plaits of hair, and so on. Maupassant has erased this feature. In "The Tresses" there is only one lock of hair, and the individualized and exclusive passion of the hero for *this* particular lock of hair practically bestows on it the status of a person, contrary to the apparent logic of fetishism (even if, as will be seen, this does reveal its deepest function). As for flowers and antique objects, Maupassant has respected the multiplicity of things while avoiding the mechanical repetition: the greenhouse full of flowers and the collection of antique objects are structured groups of varied elements, almost works of art. Far from being perceived as the monomania of an individual who is prey to a ridiculous obsession, they are traditional objects of social exchange: people visit greenhouses and collections.

Finally, like a good lawyer, Maupassant chose to show only innocent, socially inoffensive fetishist behavior. A love for flowers or trin-



kets does not harm anyone (except, emotionally, she whom one neglects for the benefit of the flowers). Maupassant's intentions are especially visible in the case of the hair fetishist. Hair fetishists are only arrested (and examined by doctors) when they cut off women's hair in the streets. Maupassant's hero finds an already-severed head of hair in the bottom of an old chest of drawers. If the hair was cut off, it was done so in the past by a lover, a husband, or by the woman herself (one is never told) in the context of an ordinary love affair, and not by the protagonist now, in the context of perverse behavior. One might even say that he is the victim of the tresses that have crossed centuries to seduce him. In any case, the reader may indeed be astonished when he finds this inoffensive man shut up in an asylum at the end of the story and may wonder, in an antipsychiatric manner, if it is not the asylum that has driven him mad by depriving him of his companion.

The only way that Maupassant appears not to have idealized fetishism is by making it a fatal passion that draws its victim into madness. As he describes it, fetishism never manages to keep a man from the anguish whose return it was supposed to have prevented. However, in describing as "tragic" something that is in reality far from being such, he is in fact idealizing it all the more. Freud comments at the beginning of his study on "fetishism" that "it is seldom felt by them as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering. Usually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it facilitates their erotic life."<sup>10</sup>

### Suggested Fetishism

In "The Tresses," as in "A Divorce Case," Maupassant associated the hero's choice of fetish with a fear inspired by women and by love. In "The Tresses" it is a systematic preference for "women of former times," out of fear for women of today ("The past attracts me, the present frightens me, because the future is death" [p. 800]); in "A Divorce Case" the hero drifts toward fetishism as soon as marriage reveals to him that his wife . . . is a woman. This is very explicit: Maupassant's heroes, being poets and thinkers, progressively reason their way into perversion. He follows "in slow motion" (thanks to the format of the diary, or the retrospective narrative focused on the hero) their logical descent into madness. We see how, in order to protect themselves from the fatal threat concealed in a woman's love, but nonetheless continue that love in a different form, they eventually fix their desire on hair or on flowers. This is explicit, and perhaps excessively so: not only do the heroes analyze their choices, but both



short stories propose a sort of round-trip journey. In the first instance, the hero displaces his desire onto the fetish; in the second, the haunting image of the woman reappears inside the fetish itself, and the sensual pleasure he experiences in handling the fetish is translated into "normal" sexual terms. In real cases of fetishism there is a substitution: the image of the female body and the female sex is definitively masked by the part of the body or by the object in which the desired and absent phallus is envisaged. With Maupassant there is instead a superimposition: through metaphorical games the female sex reappears as the fetish, as though the desire were even stronger than the fear it inspired. This is so because Maupassant was not a fetishist: he could indeed grasp the horror that the female sex inspires in the fetishist, but he had trouble imagining another object for his desire other than that which, on his account, he had so easily accepted. Both stories end, then, with a sort of ascent toward sexual climax that is at once an accomplishment (for the fetish brings sexual pleasure) and a tragic failure (for the object the hero had fled reappears and draws him into madness).

There is just a hint, then, of the link between fetishism and the fear of castration — even if it is enacted through all sorts of associations, cultural games, and metaphors; the phallic value of the fetish is ignored, even if Maupassant does talk about hair in terms of snakes, spindles, and comet tails. It is far from my intentions to translate Maupassant literally into Freudian terms. The empathy that makes Maupassant enter into the game of perversion has its limits, its blind spots. Moreover, the literary text itself is a game that obeys other rules entirely. I am treating "The Tresses" as the narrative of a sexological case, while it is at the same time a fantastic short story and a literary exercise in variations on a theme by François Villon. However, my reading of "The Apparition" has convinced me that the fantastic construction was away of distorting the message in order to let it come to the surface.

### **"The Tresses"**

"The Tresses" follows the same path as perversion, but in reverse: we leave the fetish and return, step by step, to the woman, as though we were in analysis. This path is traced twice, the theme being merely indicated at first and then amplified.

In the prologue to his narrative, the hero begins by talking in a general way about his taste for antique furniture and objects and then becomes more specific: women's watches beating against their hearts at the hour of love, women from the past, dead ones he can love "from a distance" (p. 799). Is he regretful, or relieved, or both? We can con-



clude that his regret conceals his relief since this discourse stops short on the threshold of his presupposition: loving women of the present would mean facing death.

The long, singular narrative that ensues takes the same path as the prologue: a piece of antique furniture fascinates him, and soon, the woman behind it emerges in the form of a comparison ("like the face of a woman" [p. 800]) that will be systematically elaborated: charm, temptation, need for possession (purchase), honeymoon, caresses, and so on. The anatomy of the furniture will thus be explored like the anatomy of a woman: this could be just the sort of exercise in suggestive writing that Maupassant adores, but it remains discreet, in harmony with the lyrical tone of the text. It does not, however, prevent the Freudian reader of "Fetishism" from indulging in an exercise that is perhaps too tempting: Why does the lover continually handle the furniture? Is he searching for a hiding place? Could something be missing? The crack in the woodwork he probes with a knife is both the site of a lack and the path to the lost object, which finally presents itself to the astonished observer in the form of a head of hair, splendid "like the fiery tail of a comet" (p. 801). It is also tempting to gloss over the hero's questions after his discovery, which perhaps link up with the questions he asked himself before: Who cut off this hair, and why? In each case the furniture, initially compared with a woman, gives way to the part of a woman it conceals (from metaphor to metonymy), and this part itself leads, in a hallucinatory manner, to the reconstitution of the whole woman (from the part to the whole). The work of fetishism is thus *undone* (for the woman returns with her sex), but only partially, since he is still protected from her by imagining her as "dead" and since, after all, it's only a head of hair.

This suggestive and poetic game of comparison (furniture = woman; hair = woman) allows the reader to understand the function of fetishism, which would no doubt have been less apparent had the hero been in love with the nails in the soles of women's boots. What does remain somewhat obscure is the systematic play of associations between the woman and death. Fetishism appears linked with a fascination (one of horror but also of desire) with death. But it is made clear that to love a dead woman is a compromise that allows you to love without being killed by her — unless she returns from the dead! Maupassant orchestrated this funereal desire (whose relation to castration anxiety we can only suppose) with recourse to two very different levels of language: the literary and that used by the sexologists. On the literary side is Villon, interpreted in a somewhat Nervalian manner ("It seemed to



me I had lived in former times, and that I must have known this woman" [p. 801], recalling the protagonist's daydreams in "For Sale"), and the theme of the "dead lover" as it was developed by Gautier and his successors. On the sexological side is an incongruous reference to another perversion, necrophilia, as proposed by the asylum's doctor at the beginning of the story. "He is a sort of necrophile" (p. 799), and he specifies at the end, "Sergeant Bertrand is not the only man who fell in love with the dead" (p. 803).<sup>11</sup> Let us not forget that, in 1884, while Maupassant was writing "The Tresses," fetishism had not yet been named, as it was in 1887 by Binet. On the other hand, the word necrophiliac was quite common. Disinterring the dead in cemeteries, the necrophiliac then finds his pleasure. The hero of "La Tombe" could have been taken for a necrophiliac, even if he was in reality merely a desperate widower. The subject of "The Tresses," however, is not a necrophiliac at all: the dead women he loves are imaginary, and he loves them for the fact that they were once alive. But Maupassant is quite free with his terms: this use of the word necrophile harmonizes with the theme of death and gives a scientific aura to the doctor's discourse. A perversion must be baptized and patronized (the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch were on to something). Sergeant Bertrand was the patron of "The Tresses," just as Louis II of Bavaria would later patronize "A Divorce Case."

### "A Divorce Case"

M. Chassel is about to be married. From the start he seems extremely disillusioned, disgusted with the world and God's creatures: we know nothing else about him. But he believes he has found a rare gem — a woman who escapes the laws of sordid nature. He marries her and discovers that she is like all the rest. "One day she was suffering from a passing fever, and I caught in her breath the faint, subtle, almost imperceptible odor of human decay" (p. 796). From that moment on he will love flowers. During this period it was usually young women who discovered the disgusting side of nature when they married. The disappointment of an experienced man is astonishing. Perhaps he is reliving a previous disappointment? Where does his horror for "rotting" flesh come from? In fact, his disgust stems less from his wife's breath than from her genitals, as is made clear in the first version of the story published in *Gil Blàs*. God, according to M. Chassel, willingly confused love with the revolting evacuations of the bowels and "with everything about the being that is most filthy, most repugnant, most hideous," so that man "stretches out his lips, thirsting for the ideal,



and finds only immeasurable filth." ("An aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitals," wrote Freud.) By showing the link between disgust for the female genitals and the fetishist's deviation, "A Divorce Case" resonates with the Freudian hypothesis much more clearly than "The Tresses."

But here, too, there is a departure from the Freudian model. While M. Chassel's discourse expresses castration anxiety, it is simultaneously inscribed within a much wider ideological framework; it belongs to those discourses against God and the pitfalls of nature that Maupassant generously attributes to his characters, the greatest example of this is Roger de Salins's tirade in "Idle Beauty." However, what is most surprising is how the fetishist celebrates the object of his love. Rather than the psychological exploration of a perversion, this celebration seems more like a literary exercise on a suggestive theme, a daring variation on the traditional comparison between women and flowers. The female genitals, which incited so much disgust, reappear in an idealized form in the description of the flowers: "The rim of their calyx is curled, paler than their throats, and the corolla hides itself there, a mysterious seductive mouth, sweet to the tongue, displaying and concealing the delicate, wonderful, and sacred organs of these divine little creatures that smell pleasant and do not talk" (p. 797). Repress the natural and it comes back even stronger: not everyone can be a fetishist.<sup>12</sup>

### **"The Unknown Woman"**

The very curious story with which I shall conclude shows that, even if Maupassant was not a fetishist, even if he had difficulty imagining the phallic value of the fetish, he was sensitive to the logic of the imaginary displacements effected by fetishism. It is possible to classify "The Unknown Woman" as one of Maupassant's fantastic stories. It is also a suggestive story and, above all, a psychological study of a phenomenon related to fetishism, whose name in pathological terminology I do not know but that could be called "counterfetishism."

In fetishism, the discovery of castration, together with the desire not to renounce one's love for women, leads to the displacement of the desire onto another part of the body (or onto an object) that will come to represent the absent penis. Roger des Annettes, the hero of "The Unknown Woman," seems to find another solution: he displaces the image of castration and the horror that is associated with it onto another part of the body, so that he can continue to love the woman just as she is. However, the benefits of this process are fewer than



those of fetishism, since it ends fatally in fiasco and humiliation. Is this common? In literature, I see only one other example, that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the misadventure he recounts in Book VII of the *Confessions*. Just as he is about to make love to the marvelous Zulietta in Venice, at the height of passion, he notices (or thinks he notices) that she has an inverted nipple — one nipple is not like the other! How could such a thing be possible? Here is Rousseau, convinced that he is holding in his arms “a sort of monster, the outcast of nature, of mankind and of love.”<sup>13</sup> He is manifestly stupefied and she ends up throwing him out, advising him to study mathematics instead.

Roger des Annettes, more experienced than Rousseau, nevertheless experiences a similar disappointment. A woman he meets on the Pont de la Concorde fascinates him. The descriptions he provides of her body hair (“The shadow of a mustache on one lip set him dreaming . . . dreaming . . . as the sight of a bunch of flowers lying on a table stirs dreams of a beloved woods” [p. 811]) and her eyes (“deep, open caverns in her head, through which one saw right into her, entered into her” [p. 811]) allude overtly to her genitals, no doubt passionately desired: Roger des Annettes, standing by the Obelisk (!), depicts himself as “struck down like a beast” by the strongest feeling of desire that had ever assailed him. But when, at the end of the story, he watches her undress, he discovers that she has between her shoulders “a black stain,” which he immediately links to the excessive hairiness that had initially seemed so auspicious. No more obelisk: it is all a fiasco. But the discovery does not stop the spellbound man from remaining in love with the woman he can no longer have, and being disgusted by other women in comparison.

A strange story: Is this necessarily as I have suggested, the inverse phenomenon of fetishism (the displacement of castration instead of the displacement of the desired phallus)? Or, on the contrary, the hallucination of a dreaded phallus? At this point an even stranger erotic poem by Maupassant, “La Femme à barbe” comes to mind.<sup>14</sup>

### “Who Knows?”

In order to continue to explore this network of short stories, one would need to construct a psychocritical reading of Maupassant’s work: I have only attempted to do so in a hypothetical fashion, given that my aim is to point out that Maupassant’s originality lies in his approach to fetishism. Initially struck by the richness of his intuitions, which I contrasted with medical observations, I was gradually led to define their limitations when tested against Freudian theory. Michel Tournier



claims that the artist, like a child, is a perverse polymorph. Maupassant may well be a polymorph, but not a universal one. Although he went a long way with fetishism, Maupassant was unable to overcome the very direct love he had for the female sex. Moreover, he does not share the same fascinated indulgence for other deviations, such as homosexuality, of which he talks very little, and always with horror. No doubt he rejected this perversion so violently because he was to a certain extent threatened by it. Indeed his attraction to fetishism stems from the fact that he considered it less a vice (to be rejected) or a sexual perversion (to be studied) than an affair of the imagination, one of the paths that lead to madness. His fetishists, like Mme Hermet, are bolder doubles of the tragic heroes who venture to the threshold of madness in "The Horla" and "Who Knows?" for they have crossed the line. Therefore, the final word must be left to the doctor in "The Tresses": "The mind of man is capable of anything" (p. 804).

#### NOTES

1. The "Courrier de Paris," published in *L'Indépendance belge* on the 17 January 1852 by Jules Lecomte, is reproduced in a note by Marie-Claire Bancquart in *Le Horla et autres contes cruels et fantastiques* (Paris: Garnier, 1976), pp. 539-42.
2. See Pierre Hahn, *Nos Ancêtres les pervers: La Vie des homosexuels sous le second Empire* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1979); Christian Bonello, *Le Discours médical sur l'homosexualité en France au XIXe siècle*, Postgraduate thesis, University of Paris VII, 1984; and Philippe Lejeune, "Autobiographie et homosexualité en France au XIXe siècle," *Romantisme* 56 (1987).
3. Jean-Martin Charcot and Valentin Magnan, "Inversions du sens génital," *Archives de Neurologie* (Jan.-Feb. 1882, July 1882) (reedited in a volume in 1987 by Editions Frénésie, as part of the "Insania" collection); Alfred Binet, "Le Fétichisme dans l'amour," *Revue philosophique* (Aug.-Sept. 1887) (reprinted in *Etudes de psychologie expérimentale*, 1888).
4. Auguste Voisin, J. Socquet, and A. Motet, "L'Etat mental de P . . . , poursuivi pour avoir coupé les nattes de plusieurs jeunes filles," *Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale*, 3d series (23) 1890.
5. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961). See also the special issue "Objets du fétichisme," *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse* 2 (Autumn 1970), which contains the list of texts in which Freud refers to fetishism (p. 29) and a bibliography of psychoanalytical works on fetishism (pp. 127-28).



6. See notes to "Un Cas de divorce," *Contes et nouvelles*, vol. 2 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1992-93), pp. 1572, 1576.
7. Jacques-Louis Douchin, *La Vie érotique de Maupassant* (Paris: Suger, 1986), p. 20.
8. Charcot is mentioned in two of Maupassant's short stories ("Magnétisme" [1882] and "Un Fou?" [1884]). In his chronicle "Une Femme" (in *Gil Blàs* 16 [1882]), Maupassant, criticizing this fashion for hysteria, depicts Charcot jokingly as the "high priest of hysteria," and as a "breeder of hysterics at home."
9. Freud never wrote a commentary on Maupassant, but he knew his short stories well. Maupassant's name is among the most quoted names of authors in his correspondence. For example, in a December 17, 1896, letter to Fliess, Freud is able to illustrate the link he established between agoraphobia and fantasies of prostitution by referring to *Signe* and to the expression "faire la fenêtre" (i.e., the sign given to men from windows) used by a prostitute's client.
10. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 21, p. 152.
11. Sergeant Bertrand was arrested in 1849 for violating sepulchers, mutilating the corpses while masturbating. See his autobiography, published by Amboise Tardieu, *Etude médico-légale sur les attentats aux mœurs* (Paris: Ballière, 1878), pp. 114-23.
12. For a different angle on "A Divorce Case," see Annamaria Laserra's study on "il feticismo e la 'folie poétique'"; "Un cas de divorce di Guy de Maupassant" in *Berenice* 11 (July 1984).
13. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, ed. and trans. Philip Nicholas Furbank (London: Campbell, 1992), p. 294.
14. Reproduced in Jacques-Louis Douchin, *La Vie érotique de Maupassant* (Paris: Suger, 1986), pp. 54-56.

Translated by Rachel Ashton.



## CONTENTS

A DIVORCE CASE .....	793
THE TRESSES .....	798
THE APPARITION .....	804
THE UNKNOWN WOMAN .....	810



## A DIVORCE CASE

MME CHASSEL'S COUNSEL began his speech: "Your honor, gentlemen of the jury, the case that I am called on to defend before you would more suitably be treated by medicine than by justice and constitutes much more a pathological case than an ordinary case of law. At first sight the facts seem simple.

"A young man, of considerable wealth, of a high-minded and ardent nature, a generous heart, falls in love with a supremely beautiful young girl, more than beautiful, adorable, as gracious, as charming, as good, and as tender as she is pretty, and he marries her.

"For some time, he conducts himself toward her as a solicitous and affectionate husband; then he neglects her, bullies her, seems to feel for her an insurmountable aversion, an unconquerable dislike. One day he even strikes her, not only for no reason but under no pretext.

"I will not labor to represent to you, gentlemen, his strange behavior, incomprehensible to everyone. I will not paint for you the unspeakable life of these two creatures and the frightful grief of this young woman.

"To convince you I have only to read to you some fragments from a diary written each day by this poor man, this poor madman. For it is a madman that we have before us, gentlemen, and the case is all the more curious, all the more interesting in that it recalls in many particulars the dementia of the unfortunate prince who died recently, the bizarre king who reigned platonically over Bavaria. I will call this case 'poetic madness.'

"You will remember all the tales told of that strange prince. He had built in the heart of the most magnificent scenery in his kingdom veritable fairy-tale castles. The reality of the beauty of things and places was not enough for him; he imagined and created in these fantastic dwellings artificial horizons produced by means of theatrical devices, scene changes and painted forests, fabled empires where the leaves of the trees were made of precious stones. He had Alps and glaciers, steppes, sandy deserts scorched by the sun; and at night, under the rays of the real moon, lakes illuminated below by fantastic electric lights. On these



lakes swans floated and small boats glided, while an orchestra composed of the finest musicians in the world intoxicated the royal madman's senses with romance.

"This man was chaste, this man was a virgin. He had never loved anything except a dream, his dream, his divine dream.

"One evening he carried off in his boat a young woman, a great artiste, and begged her to sing. She sang, herself intoxicated by the beauty of the courtyards, by the warm, sweet air, by the fragrance of flowers, and by the ecstasy of this young handsome prince.

"She sang, as women sing whom love has touched, then, distraught, trembling wildly, she fell on the king's heart and sought his lips.

"But he threw her in the lake and, taking up his oars, reached the shore, without worrying whether she were rescued or not.

"Gentlemen of the jury, we have before us a case that is similar in all respects. I will do no more than read to you now some passages from the diary that we discovered in the drawer of a bureau.

"How dull and ugly everything is, always the same, always hideous! How I dream of a lovelier, nobler, more changeful world! How wretched would be the imagination of their God, if their God existed or if he had not created other things as well.

"Always woods, little woods, rivers that are like all other rivers, plains like all other plains, all things are alike and monotonous. And man! . . . Man? . . . What a horrible animal, wicked, vain, and disgusting!

"One should love, love madly, without seeing the object of one's love. For to see is to understand, and to understand is to despise. One should love, intoxicating oneself with the beloved as one gets drunk on wine, in such a way as to lose consciousness of what one is drinking. And drink, drink, drink, without drawing breath, day and night.

"I have found her, I think. She has in all her person something ideal that does not seem of this world and lends wings to my dream. Oh, how different from what they are do people seem to me in my dreams. She is blonde, very blonde, with hair full of inexpressible delicate shades. Her eyes are blue. Only blue eyes ravish my soul. The whole being of a woman, the woman who exists in the depths of my heart, shows itself to me in the eyes, only in the eyes.

"Oh, a mystery! What mystery? The eyes? . . . The whole universe lies therein, because they see it, because they reflect it. They contain the universe, things and beings, forests and oceans, men and beasts, sun-



sets, stars, the arts, all, all, they see, pluck, and bear everything away; and they hold even more, they hold the soul, they hold the thinking man, the man who loves, who laughs, who suffers. Oh, look into the blue eyes of women; they are deep as the sea, changing as the sky, so sweet, so sweet, sweet as gentle winds, sweet as music, sweet as kisses, transparent, so clear that one sees behind them, one sees the soul, the blue soul that colors them, that animates them, that makes them divine.

"Yes, the soul is the color of the glance. Only the blue soul bears the dream in its depths, it has taken its azure from sea and space.

"The eyes! Think of them! The eyes! They drink in the visible creation to feed thought. They drink in the world, color, movement, books, pictures, all beauty, all ugliness, and create ideas from them. And when they look at us, they fill us with the sense of an otherworldly joy. They make us sense what we will never know; they make us realize that the realities of our thoughts are despicable and filthy things.

"I love her, too, for her manner of walking.

"Even when a bird walks, we know it has wings," the poet said.

"When she passes, one feels that she is not of the same breed as ordinary women, she is of a finer, more divine blood.

"I am marrying her tomorrow . . . I am afraid . . . I am afraid of so many things.

"Two beasts, two dogs, two wolves, two foxes, prowl through the woods and meet. The one is male, the other female. They mate. They mate because of an animal instinct that drives them to continue the breed, their breed, the breed whose form, fur, size, movements, and habits they have.

"All beasts do as much, without knowing why!

"So do we.

"All that I have done in marrying her is to obey this senseless urge that drives us toward the female.

"She is my wife. So long as I desired her ideally, she was for me the unrealizable dream on the verge of being realized.

"From the very second when I held her in my arms, she was nothing more than the being nature has used to dash all my hopes.

"Has she dashed them? No. Yet I am tired of her, tired of being unable to touch her, to brush her with my hand or my lips, without my heart swelling with an inexpressible disgust, not perhaps disgust



with her, but a loftier, wider, more contemptuous disgust, disgust with the embrace of love, so vile as it has become for all refined things, a shameful act that must be hidden, which is only spoken of in low tones, blushingly . . .

“I can no longer endure the sight of my wife approaching me, calling me with a smile, a glance, and open arms. I can no longer endure it. I imagined once that her kiss would transport me to the heavens. One day she was suffering from a passing fever, and I caught in her breath the faint, subtle, almost imperceptible odor of human decay. I was overcome!

“Oh! flesh, seductive living dung, walking putrefaction, a mass that thinks, speaks, looks, and smiles, full of fermenting food, rosy, pretty, tempting, deceitful as is the soul . . .

“Why is it only flowers that smell so good, great pale or brilliant flowers, whose tones and hues make my heart flutter and trouble my eyes? They are so beautiful, so delicate in structure, so varied and so sensual, half open like mouths, more tempting than mouths, and hollow, with lips curled back, toothed, fleshy, powdered with a seed of life that engenders in each one of them a different perfume.

“They reproduce themselves, they alone, in all the world, without defilement of their inviolable breed, giving off round themselves the divine incense of their love, the fragrant sweat of their caresses, the essence of their incomparable bodies, of their bodies that are adorned with every grace, every elegance, every form, and possess the fascination of every color; and the intoxicating charm of every scent . . .

*“Selected fragments, six months later.*

“I love flowers, not as flowers but as delicate and material beings; I spend my days and my nights in the greenhouses where I hide them like women in harems.

“Who, except myself, knows the sweetness, the maddening charm, the shuddering, sensual, ideal, superhuman ecstasy of these tender caresses; and these kisses on rosy flesh, on red flesh, on white flesh, the miraculously varied, delicate, rare, fine, unctuous flesh of these wonderful flowers?

“I have greenhouses where no one enters but myself and the man who looks after them.

“I enter as one slips into a place of secret delight. In the high glass gallery, I pass first between two throngs of corollas, closed, half open



or spread wide, which slope from ground to roof. It is the first kiss they send me.

“Those particular ones, those flowers, those that adorn this ante-room of my mysterious passions, are my servants and not my favorites.

“They greet me, as I pass, with their changing brilliance and their fresh exhalations. They are darlings, coquettes, rising in eight-tiered rows on my right hand and eight-tiered rows on my left, and so crowded that they seem like two gardens overflowing all the way down to my feet.

“My heart palpitates, my eyes light up at sight of them, the blood runs madly through my veins, my soul leaps within me, and my hands tremble already with the desire to touch them. I pass on. There are three closed doors at the end of this high gallery. I can make my choice. I have three harems.

“But most often I turn to the orchids, my mesmerizing favorites. Their room is low, stifling. The damp, warm air makes my skin moist, my throat contract for want of air, and my fingers tremble. They come, these foreign girls, from swampy, burning, unhealthy countries. They are as fascinating as sirens, deadly as poison, marvelously bizarre, enervating, terrifying. See how similar they are to butterflies with their enormous wings, their tiny paws, their eyes. For they have eyes. They look at me, they see me, prodigious, unbelievable beings, fairies, daughters of the sacred earth, the impalpable air, and warm light, the mother of the world. Yes, they have wings and eyes and delicate shades that no painter can imitate, every charm, every grace, every shape that one can dream of. Their flanks are cleft, perfumed, and transparent, open for love and more tempting than any woman's flesh. The unimaginable contours of their tiny bodies thrust the soul, intoxicated, into a paradise of visions and ideal delights. They quiver on their stems as if about to take flight. Will they fly, will they come to me? No, it is my heart that hovers above them like some mystic male creature, tortured by love.

“No insect's wing can brush them. We are alone, they and I, in the translucent prison that I have built them. I watch them and I contemplate them, I admire them, I adore them, one after the other.

“How sleek they are, how mysterious, how rosy, with a rosiness that moistens the lips with desire. How I love them! The rim of their calyx is curled, paler than their throats, and the corolla hides itself there, a mysterious seductive mouth, sweet to the tongue, displaying and concealing the delicate, wonderful, and sacred organs of these divine little creatures that smell pleasant and do not talk.



“Sometimes I am seized with a passion for one of them that endures as long as its existence, a few days, a few nights. Then it is taken from the common gallery and enclosed in a darling little glass retreat where a trickle of water murmurs through a bed of tropical grass from the islands of the great Pacific. And there I stay, at her side, ardent, feverish, and tormented, knowing her death is near and watching her fade, while I possess her, while I breathe, drink, pluck her short life with one inexpressible caress.”

When he had finished reading these fragments, counsel continued:

“Decency, gentlemen of the jury, restrains me from continuing to lay before you the curious confessions of this shamefully idealistic madman. The few passages that I have just laid before you will be sufficient, I think, for you to understand this case of mental disease, less rare than one thinks in our age of hysterical dementia and corrupted decadence.

“I feel therefore that my client is entitled more than any other woman to demand a divorce, in the exceptional position in which she has been placed by the strange mental derangement of her husband.”

Originally published as “Un Cas de divorce” (1886).

## THE TRESSES

THE WALLS OF the cell were bare and whitewashed. A narrow, barred window, so high that it could not easily be reached, lit this bright and sinister little room; the madman, seated on a straw chair, looked at us with a fixed eye, vague and haunted. He was very thin, with wrinkled cheeks and almost-white hair that had evidently become so in a few months. His clothes seemed too large for his dried-up limbs, his shrunken chest, and hollow body. One felt that this man had been ravaged by thought, by a single thought, as fruit is by a worm. His Madness, his idea, was there in his head, obstinate, harassing, devouring. It was eating his body, little by little. It, the Invisible, the Impalpable, the Unseizable, the Immaterial Idea, gnawed his flesh, drank his blood, and extinguished his life.

What a mystery, this man killed by a Thought! He is an object of fear and pity, this madman! What strange dream, frightful and deadly, resided in his forehead, to fold such profound and ever-changing wrinkles in it?

The doctor said to me: “He has terrible paroxysms of rage and is one of the strangest lunatics I have ever seen. His madness is of an erotic,



macabre kind. He is a sort of necrophile. He has written a journal that shows as plain as day the malady of his mind. His madness is visible, so to speak. If you are interested, you may glance through this document."

I followed the doctor into his office and he gave me the journal of this miserable man.

"Read it," said he, "and give me your opinion of it."

Here is what the little book contained:

"Up to the age of thirty-two, I lived quietly, without love. Life seemed very simple, very good, and very easy. I was rich. I had a taste for so many things that I could never feel a passion for anything. It was good to live! I awoke happy each day, to do things that it pleased me to do, and I went to bed satisfied, with a calm hope for the next day and a future without care.

"I had had some mistresses without ever having my heart torn by desire or my soul scarred by love after the possession. It is good to live this way. It is better to love, but it is terrible. Still those who love like everybody else must find happiness, though a lesser one than mine, perhaps, for love has come to me in an unbelievable manner.

"Being rich, I collected ancient furniture and antiques. I often thought of the unknown hands that had touched these things, the eyes that had admired them, and the hearts that had loved them—for one does love such things! I often spent hours and hours looking at a little watch from the last century. It was so dainty, so pretty with its enamel and chiseled gold. And it still ran, as on the day when some woman had bought it, delighted in the possession of so fine a jewel. It had not ceased to palpitate, to live its mechanical life, but had ever continued its regular ticktock, although a century had passed. Who then had first carried it on her breast, in the warmth of her dress—the heart of the watch beating against the heart of the woman? What hands had held it at the ends of warm fingers, then wiped the porcelain shepherds, tarnished a little by the moisture of her skin? What eyes had looked on this flowered dial awaiting the hour, the dear hour, the divine hour?

"How I should have liked to see her, to know her, the woman who had chosen this rare and exquisite object. But she is dead! I am possessed by a desire for women of former times; from a distance I love all those who loved long ago. The story of past tenderness fills my heart with regrets. Oh! the beauty, the smiles, the caresses of youth, the hopes! Should not these things be eternal!

"How I have wept, through entire nights, over the women of yore, so beautiful, so tender, so sweet, whose arms opened to love, and who



are now dead! The kiss is immortal! It goes from lip to lip, from century to century, from age to age! Men take it and give it and die.

"The past attracts me, the present frightens me, because the future is death. I regret all that which is gone, I weep for those who have lived; I wish to stop the hour, to arrest time. But it goes, it goes on, it passes away, and, from second to second, it takes a little of me for the annihilation of tomorrow. And I shall never live again.

"Farewell, women of yesterday. I love you.

"And yet I have nothing to complain about. I have found her whom I awaited, and I have tasted through her inconceivable pleasure.

"I was roaming around Paris on a sunny morning, with joyous foot and happy soul, looking in the shops with the vague interest of a stroller. All at once I saw in an antique shop an Italian piece of furniture from the seventeenth century. It was very beautiful, very rare. I decided it must be by a Venetian artist, named Vitelli, who was famous at that time. Then I went on.

"Why did the memory of this piece of furniture follow me with so much force that I retracted my steps? I stopped again before the shop to look at it, and felt that it tempted me.

"What a singular thing temptation is! One looks at an object, and, little by little, it seduces you, troubles you, takes possession of you like the face of a woman. Its charm enters into you, a strange charm that comes from its form, its color, and its physiognomy. Already one loves it, desires it, wants it. A need for possession seizes you, a pleasant need at first, because timid, but it increases, becoming violent and irresistible. And the dealers seem to suspect, from the flame in your eye, this secret, growing desire. I bought that piece of furniture and had it brought to my house immediately. I placed it in my room.

"Oh! I pity those who do not know this honeymoon of the collector with the object he has just acquired. He caresses it with his eye and hand as if it were flesh; he returns every moment to it, thinks of it continually, wherever he goes and whatever he may be doing. The thought of it follows him into the street, into the world, everywhere. And when he comes back home, before even removing his gloves or his hat, he goes to look at it with the tenderness of a lover.

"Truly, for eight days I adored that piece of furniture. I kept opening its doors and drawers; I handled it with delight and experienced all the intimate joys of possession.

"One evening, in feeling the thickness of a panel, I noticed that there might be a hiding place there. My heart began to beat, and I spent the night searching for the secret, without being able to discover it.



"I came on it the next day by forcing a piece of metal into a crevice in the paneling. A shelf slipped, and I saw, exposed on a lining of black velvet, a marvelous lock of a woman's hair!

"Yes, a lock of hair, an enormous twist of blond hair, almost red, which had been cut off close to the scalp and tied together with a golden cord.

"I stood there stupefied, trembling, and disturbed! An almost imperceptible perfume, so old that it seemed like the soul of an odor, arose from this mysterious drawer and this most surprising relic.

"I took it gently, almost religiously, and lifted it from its resting place. Immediately it unwound, spreading out its golden billows on the floor, where it fell, thick and light, supple and brilliant, like the fiery tail of a comet.

"A strange emotion seized me. What was this all about? When, how, why had this hair been shut up in this piece of furniture? What adventure, what drama was hidden beneath this souvenir? Who had cut it off? Some lover, on a day of parting? Some husband, on a day of vengeance? Or, perhaps, the woman herself, whose hair it was, on a day of despair? Was it on entering the cloister that she had thrown there this fortune of love, as a token left to the world of the living? Was it the hour of closing the tomb on the young and beautiful dead woman, that he who adored her took this diadem of her head, the only thing he could preserve of her, the only living part of her body that would not rot, the only thing that he could still love and caress and kiss, in his fits of grief?

"Was it not strange that this hair should remain there thus, when there was no longer any vestige of the body with which it was born?

"It curled about my fingers and touched my skin with a singular caress, the caress of death. I felt moved, as though I were going to weep.

"I kept it a long time in my hands, then it seemed to me that it had some effect on me, as if something of the soul still remained in it. And I laid it on the velvet again, the velvet faded by time, then pushed in the drawer, shut the doors of the closet, and took to the street to dream.

"I walked straight ahead, full of sadness and agitation, the kind of agitation that remains in the heart after the kiss of love. It seemed to me I had lived in former times, and that I had known this woman.

"And Villon's verse rose to my lips, like a sob:

Tell me where, in what country  
Is Flora the beautiful Roman



Archipiada or Thaïs

Who was first cousin to her once  
Echo who speaks when there's a sound  
Over pond or river  
Whose beauty was more than human?  
But where are the snows of last winter?

Where is the learned Heloïse  
For whom they castrated Pierre Abelard  
And monked him at Saint Denis?  
For his love he suffered this outrage  
Also where is the queen  
Who had Buridan tied in a sack  
And dumped into the Seine?  
But where are the snows of last winter?

That queen white as a lily  
Who sang with a siren's voice  
And big-footed Berte, Beatrice, Alice  
Haremburgis who held Maine  
And Jeanne the good maid of Lorraine  
Whom the English burned at Rouen, where  
Where are they sovereign Virgin?  
But where are the snows of last winter?¹

"When I returned to my house I felt an irresistible desire to see my strange treasure again. I took it up and felt it, and in touching it a prolonged thrill ran through my limbs.

"For some days, however, I remained in my ordinary state, although the thought of this hair never left me. Whenever I came in, I had to look at it and handle it. I would turn the key of the desk with the same trembling that one has in opening the door of one's beloved, for I felt in my hands and in my heart a confused, singular, continual, sensual desire to plunge my fingers in this charming rivulet of dead hair.

"Then, when I had finished caressing it, when I had closed the drawer, I always felt that it was there, as if it were something alive, concealed, imprisoned; I felt it and I still desired it; again I felt the imperious need to touch it, to feel it, to enervate myself to the point of weakness, by contact with this cold, smooth, irritating, exciting, delicious hair.

"I lived this way for a month or two, I no longer know how long. It possessed me, haunted me. I was happy and tortured, as in the expec-



tation of love, as one is after the avowal that precedes the embrace.

"I would shut myself up alone with it in order to feel it on my skin, to bury my lips in it, to kiss it, and to bite it. I would roll it around my face, drink it in, drown my eyes in its golden waves, in order to see the day golden through it.

"I loved it! Yes, I loved it. I could no longer live without it, or be contented an hour without seeing it. And I expected... I expected... what? I know not — her!

"One night I was suddenly awakened with a feeling that I was not alone in my room. I was alone, however. But I could not go to sleep again; and, as I was tossing in the fever of insomnia, I rose and went to look at the twist of hair. It appeared to me sweeter than usual, and more animated.

"Could the dead return? The kisses with which I warmed it made me swoon with happiness, and I carried it to my bed and lay down with it, pressing it to my lips, as one does a mistress he hopes to enjoy.

"The dead returned! She came! Yes, I saw her, touched her, possessed her as she was when alive in former times, large, blonde, plump, with cool breasts, and with hips in the form of a lyre. And I followed that divine, undulating line from the throat to the feet, running along all the curves of the flesh, with my caresses.

"Yes, I possessed her, every day and every night. The Dead Woman had returned, the beautiful Dead Woman, the Adorable, the Mysterious, the Unknown, and she returned every night.

"My happiness was so great that I could not conceal it. I found in her a superhuman delight, the profound, inexplicable joy of possessing the Impalpable, the Invisible, the Dead! No lover ever tasted joys more ardent or more terrible.

"I didn't know how to conceal my happiness. I loved it so much that I could not bear to leave it. I carried it with me always, everywhere. I walked with it through the city, as if it were my wife, and took it to the secluded boxes at the theater, as one would a mistress. But they saw it... and guessed... they took me... and they threw me in prison, like a criminal. They took it away... oh! misery!..."

The manuscript stopped there. And suddenly, as I raised my bewildered eyes to the doctor, a frightful cry, a howl of powerless fury and of exasperated desire filled the asylum.

"Listen," said the doctor, "we have to douse that obscene maniac with water five times a day. Sergeant Bertrand is not the only man who fell in love with the dead."



I stammered, moved with astonishment, horror, and pity: "But . . . that hair . . . did it really exist?"

The doctor got up, opened a closet full of vials and instruments, and threw, across his office, a long thick rope of blonde hair, which flew toward me like a golden bird.

I trembled as I felt on my hands its caressing, light touch. And I stood there, my heart beating with disgust and desire, the disgust we have in coming in contact with objects connected with crimes, and the desire that comes with the temptation to test some infamous and mysterious thing.

Shrugging his shoulders, the doctor added: "The mind of man is capable of anything."

---

#### NOTE

1. François Villon, *The Poems of François Villon*, trans. Galway Kinnell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), pp. 47-49.

Originally published as "La Chevelure" (1884).

## THE APPARITION

WE WERE SPEAKING of sequestration regarding a recent lawsuit. It was at the close of an evening among friends, at an old house on the Rue de Grenelle, and each of us had a story to tell, a story alleged to be true. Then, the old Marquis de la Tour Samuel, who was eighty-two, rose and, leaning on the mantelpiece, said, in somewhat shaky tones:

"I also know something strange, so strange that it has been an obsession all my life. It is now fifty-six years since the incident occurred, and yet not a month has passed in which I have not seen it again in a dream. The mark, the imprint of fear, if you can understand me, has remained with me ever since that day. For ten minutes I experienced such horrible fright that, ever since, a sort of constant terror has remained in my soul. Unexpected noises make me shudder to my depths, and objects half seen in the gloom of night inspire me with a mad desire to take flight. In short, at night I am afraid.

"Oh, no! I would not have admitted that before having reached my present age! Now I can say anything. At eighty-two years of age, I do



not feel compelled to be brave in the presence of imaginary dangers. I have never receded before real danger.

"The affair upset me so completely, and caused me such deep and mysterious and terrible distress, that I never spoke of it to anyone. I have kept it down in the depths of my being, in those depths where painful secrets, shameful secrets and all the unconfessed weaknesses of our lives are hidden. I will now tell it to you exactly as it happened, without any attempt at explanation. It can no doubt be explained, unless I was mad at the time. But I was not mad, and I will prove it. You may think what you like. Here are the simple facts:

"It was in 1827, in the month of July. I was stationed at Rouen.

"One day, as I was walking along the quay, I met a man whom I thought I recognized, without being able to recall exactly who he was. Instinctively, I made a movement to stop; the stranger perceived it, looked at me, and fell into my arms.

"He was a friend from my youth to whom I had been deeply attached. For five years I had not seen him, and he seemed to have aged half a century. His hair was quite white, and he walked with a stoop, as though completely worn out. He understood my surprise, and told me his life. A misfortune had shattered it.

"Having fallen madly in love with a young girl, he had married her, but, after a year of superhuman happiness and of passionate love, she died suddenly of heart failure, killed by love, very probably. He had left his château on the very day of her burial and had come to live in his house at Rouen. There he lived, desperate and solitary, consumed by grief, and so miserable that he thought only of suicide.

"‘Now that I have found you again,’ said he, ‘I will ask you to render me an important service, to go to my old home and get for me, from the desk of my bedroom — our bedroom — some papers that I greatly need. I cannot send a servant or a lawyer, as complete discretion and absolute silence are necessary. As for myself, nothing on earth would induce me to reenter that house. I will give you the key of the room, which I myself locked on leaving, and the key to my desk — also a note to my gardener, telling him to open the château for you. But come and breakfast with me tomorrow, and we will arrange all that.’

"I promised to do him the small favor he asked. For that matter, it was nothing of a trip, his property being but a few miles from Rouen and easily reached in an hour on horseback.

"At ten o'clock the following day I was at his house, and we breakfasted alone together, but he scarcely spoke.

"He begged me to pardon him; the thought of the visit I was about



to make to that room, the scene of his dead happiness, overwhelmed him, he said. He indeed seemed singularly agitated and preoccupied, as though some mysterious struggle were taking place in his soul.

"At last, he explained to me exactly what I had to do. It was very simple. I was to take two packages of letters and a bundle of papers from the first drawer on the right of the desk to which I had the key. He added, 'I need not beg you to refrain from glancing at them.'

"I was wounded at that remark, and told him so somewhat sharply. He stammered, 'Forgive me, I suffer so,' and he began to weep.

"I left him about one o'clock to accomplish my mission.

"The weather was glorious, and I cantered over the fields, listening to the songs of the larks and the rhythmical striking of my sword against my boot. Then I entered the forest and walked my horse. Branches of trees caressed my face as I passed, and now and then I caught a leaf with my teeth and chewed it greedily, from that sheer joy of living that inexplicably fills one with a sense of tumultuous, impalpable happiness, a sort of intoxication of strength.

"As I approached the château, I looked in my pocket for the letter I had for the gardener and was astonished at finding it sealed. I was so surprised and irritated that I was about to turn back without having fulfilled my promise but thought that I should thereby display undue susceptibility. My friend might easily have closed the envelope without noticing that he did so, in his troubled state of mind.

"The manor seemed to have been abandoned for twenty years. The gate was open and in such a state of decay that one wondered how it stood upright; the paths were overgrown with grass, and the flower beds were no longer distinguishable from the lawn.

"The noise I made by kicking loudly on a shutter brought an old man from a side door, who seemed astonished to see me. On receiving my letter, he read it, reread it, turned it over and over, looked me up and down, put the paper in his pocket, and finally asked:

"'Well! What is it you want?'

"I replied shortly: 'You ought to know, since you have just read your master's orders. I wish to enter the château.'

"He seemed overcome. 'Then you are going into . . . into her room?'

"I began to lose patience: 'See here! Do you propose to cross-examine me?'

"He stammered in confusion: 'No — sir — but it is because — that is, it has not been opened since — since the — death. If you will be kind enough to wait for five minutes, I will go to — to see if —'

"I interrupted him, angrily: 'Look here, what are you driving at? You



cannot enter the room, since I have the key!’

“He had no more to say. ‘Then, sir, I will show you the way.’

“‘Show me the staircase and leave me. I’ll find my way without you.’

“‘But — sir — indeed — ’

“This time I became really angry: ‘Now be quiet or you’ll know the reason why.’ I pushed him aside, and went into the house.

“I first went through the kitchen; then two small rooms occupied by the servant and his wife; next, I came to a wide hall, reached the stairs, which I mounted, and recognized the door indicated by my friend.

“I easily opened it and entered. The apartment was so dark that, at first, I could distinguish nothing. I stopped short, my nostrils penetrated by the disagreeable, moldy odor of unoccupied and condemned rooms, of dead rooms. Then, as my eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness, I saw plainly enough a large and disordered bedroom, the bed without sheets, but still retaining its mattresses and pillows, on one of which was a deep impression of an elbow or a head, as though someone had recently rested there.

“The chairs all seemed out of place. I noticed that a door, doubtless that of a closet, had remained half open.

“I first went to the window, which I opened to let in the light; but the fastenings of the shutters had grown so rusty that I could not move them. I even tried to break them with my sword, but without success. As I was growing irritated over my useless efforts and could now see fairly well in the semiobscurity, I renounced the idea of getting more light and went over to the writing desk.

“I sat down in an armchair, let down the top of the desk, and opened the drawer that had been indicated. It was full to the top. I needed only three packages, which I knew how to recognize, and began searching for them.

“I was straining my eyes in the effort to read the addresses, when I seemed to hear, or rather feel, something rustle behind me. I paid no attention, believing that a draft from the window was moving some drape. But, in a minute or so, another movement, almost imperceptible, sent a strangely disagreeable little shiver over my skin. It was so stupid to be affected, even slightly, that self-respect prevented my turning around. I had just found the second packet I needed and was about to lay my hand on the third when a long and painful sigh, uttered just over my shoulder, made me leap like a madman from my seat and land several feet away. As I jumped I had turned about, my hand on the hilt of my sword, and, truly, had I not felt it at my side, I would have taken to my heels like a coward.



"A tall woman, dressed in white, stood gazing at me from the back of the chair where I had been sitting an instant before.

"Such a shudder ran through all my limbs that I nearly fell backward. No one can understand unless he has felt it, that frightful, unreasoning terror! The mind becomes vague; the heart ceases to beat; the entire body grows as limp as a rag, as if one's life were ebbing away.

"I do not believe in ghosts, nevertheless I completely gave way to a hideous fear of the dead; and I suffered more in those few moments than in all the rest of my life, from the irresistible anguish of supernatural fright. If she had not spoken, I would have died, perhaps! But she spoke, she spoke in a sweet, sad voice that set my nerves vibrating. I dare not say that I became master of myself and I recovered my reason. No! I was so frightened that I scarcely knew what I was doing; but a certain innate pride, a remnant of soldierly instinct, made me, almost in spite of myself, maintain a creditable countenance. I was posing to myself, I suppose, and to her, whoever she was, woman or ghost. Afterward I realized all this, for I assure you that, at the time of the apparition, I thought of nothing. I was afraid.

"She said: 'Oh! Sir, you can render me a great service.'

"I tried to reply, but it was impossible for me to pronounce a word. Only a vague sound came from my throat.

"She continued: 'Will you? You can save me, cure me. I suffer horribly. I suffer, oh! how I suffer!' and she slowly seated herself in my armchair.

"'Will you?' she said, looking at me.

"I replied 'Yes' by a nod, my voice still being paralyzed.

"Then she held out to me a tortoiseshell comb and murmured:

"'Comb my hair, oh! comb my hair; that will cure me; it must be combed. Look at my head — how I suffer; and my hair hurts me so!'

"Her hair, unbound, very long and very black, it seemed to me, hung over the back of the chair and touched the floor.

"Why did I receive that comb with a shudder, and why did I take in my hands the long, black hair that gave my skin a gruesome, cold sensation, as though I were handling snakes? I cannot tell.

"That sensation has remained in my fingers, and I still tremble when I think of it.

"I combed her hair. I handled, I know not how, those icy locks. I twisted, knotted, and loosened them. I braided them the way one braids a horse's mane. She sighed and bowed her head, seeming to be happy. Suddenly she said: 'Thank you!' snatched the comb from my hands, and fled by the door that I had noticed ajar.



"Left alone, I experienced for several seconds the frightened agitation of one who awakens from a nightmare. At length I regained my full senses; I ran to the window, and with a mighty effort burst open the shutters, letting a flood of light into the room. Immediately I sprang to the door by which she had departed. I found it closed and immovable!

"Then a mad desire to flee came over me like a panic, the panic soldiers know in battle. I seized the three packets of letters on the open desk; ran from the room, dashed down the stairs four steps at a time, found myself outside, I know not how, and seeing my horse a few steps away, leapt in the saddle and galloped away.

"I stopped only when I reached Rouen and my own house. Throwing the bridle to my orderly, I fled to my room, where I shut myself in to think.

"For an hour I anxiously wondered whether I had not been the victim of a hallucination. Surely I had had one of those incomprehensible nervous shocks, one of those mental frights that give rise to miracles, to which the Supernatural owes its power.

"I was about to believe I had seen a vision, had a hallucination, when I approached the window. My eyes fell, by chance, on my chest. My military cape was covered with hairs; the long hairs of a woman, which had got caught in the buttons! One by one, with trembling fingers, I plucked them off and threw them away.

"I then called my orderly. I was too disturbed, too upset to go and see my friend that day, and I also wished to reflect more fully on what I ought to tell him. I sent him his letters, for which he gave the soldier a receipt. He repeatedly inquired about me. He was told I was ill, that I had had sunstroke or something. He seemed worried. Next morning at dawn I went to him, determined to tell him the truth. He had gone out the evening before and had not yet returned. I called again during the day; my friend was still absent. I waited for a week. He did not appear. Then I notified the authorities. A search was begun, but not the slightest trace of his whereabouts or manner of disappearance was discovered.

"A detailed inspection was made of the abandoned château. Nothing suspicious was discovered. No sign revealed that a woman had been hidden there.

"The inquiry led to nothing, and the search was stopped, and for fifty-six years I have heard nothing; I know no more than before."

Originally published as "Apparition" (1883).



## THE UNKNOWN WOMAN

WE WERE TALKING of lucky adventures and each of us had a strange story to tell, delightful and unexpected encounters, in a railway carriage, in a hotel, abroad, on a seashore. Seashores, said Roger des Annettes, were uncommonly propitious for love.

Gontran, who had said nothing, was consulted. "Paris is still the best of all," said he. "With a woman, as with a curio, we appreciate one more highly in a place where we never expected to find one; but the finest specimens are found only in Paris."

He was silent for some moments, then added:

"Christ, how adorable they are! Go out into our streets on any spring morning. They seem to open up like flowers, the little darlings pattering along beside the houses. What a charming, charming, charming sight! The scent of violets reaches us from the pavement; the bunches of violets that pass us in the slow-moving carts pushed by the hawkers. The city is alive, and we look at the women. Christ, how tempting they are in their light frocks, thin frocks through which their skin gleams! You stroll along, trailing their scent, senses on fire. You stroll along and sniff the air, constantly on the lookout. Such mornings are utterly divine.

"You notice her approaching in the distance, a hundred paces away you can spot and recognize the woman who will be delightful at close range. By a flower in her hat, a movement of her head, the swing of her body, you know her. She comes. You say to yourself: 'Watch out, there's one!' and walk past with your eyes devouring her.

"Is she a slip of a girl running errands, a young woman coming from church or going to visit her lover? What does it matter! Her breast is round under her transparent bodice. Oh, if only one might place a finger on it — a finger, or one's lips! Does she look shy or bold, is she dark or fair? What does it matter! The swift passage of this woman, as she flits past, sends a thrill up your spine. And how you go on desiring her until evening, the woman you met in such fashion! I'll swear I've treasured the memory of about twenty of the dear creatures seen once or ten times like this, and I would have fallen madly in love had I known them more intimately.

"But there you are, the women we cherish most fiercely are the ones we never know. Have you noticed it? It's very odd. Every now and then one catches a glimpse of women the mere sight of whom rouses in us the wildest desire. But one never more than glimpses them. For my part, when I think of all the adorable creatures whom I have jostled in the



streets of Paris, I could hang myself for rage. Where are they? Who are they? Where could I find them again, see them again? There is a proverb that says that we are always letting happiness pass us by, and I'll swear that I've more than once walked past the woman who could have snared me like a linnet with the allure of her fragrant body."

Roger des Annettes had been listening with a smile, and answered:

"I know all that as well as you. Listen what happened to me, yes, to me. About five years ago I met for the first time, on the Pont de la Concorde, a tall and rather sturdy young woman who made an impression on me . . . oh, an altogether amazing impression! She was a brunette, a plump brunette, with gleaming hair growing low on her forehead and eyebrows that bracketed both eyes, under their high arch that stretched from temple to temple. The shadow of a mustache on her lip set one dreaming . . . dreaming . . . as the sight of a bunch of flowers on a table stirs dreams of a beloved woods. She had a shapely figure, a firm rounded bosom held proudly like a challenge, offered as a temptation. Her eyes were like ink stains on the gleaming white of her skin. This girl's eyes were not eyes but shadowed caverns, deep, open caverns in her head, through which one saw right into her, entered into her. What a strange, veiled, and empty gaze, untroubled by thought and utterly lovely!

"I imagined her to be a Jewess. I followed her. More than one man turned to look at her. She walked with a slightly swaggering gait, a little graceless but very disturbing. She took a cab in the Place de la Concorde. And I stood there like a fool, beside the Obelisk; I stood transfixed by the most powerful passion of desire that had ever assailed me.

"I thought about her for at least three weeks, then I forgot her.

"Six months later I saw her again in the Rue de la Paix, and at the sight of her my heart leapt as though I had caught sight of some former mistress whom I had loved to distraction. I stopped to better watch her approach. As she passed me, almost touching me, I seemed to be standing before the mouth of a furnace. Then, as she drew away, I felt as if a cool wind were blowing across my face. I did not follow her. I was afraid of committing some folly, afraid of myself.

"Again and again I saw her in my dreams. You know what such obsessions are.

"It was a year before I found her again; then, one evening at sunset, around the month of May, I recognized her in a woman who was walking in front of me up the Champs-Élysées.

"The Arc de l'Étoile lifted its somber outline against the flaming curtain of the sky. A golden dust, a mist of rosy light hung in the air, it was one of those glorious evenings that are the immortal glory of Paris.



"I followed her, wild with the longing to speak to her, to kneel at her feet, to tell her of the emotion that was choking me.

"Twice I walked past her in order to turn and meet her again. Twice, as I passed her, I experienced again that sensation of fiery heat that had come over me on the Rue de la Paix.

"She looked at me. Then I saw her enter a house on the Rue de Presbourg. I waited two hours in a doorway. She did not come out. At last I decided to question the concierge. He did not appear to understand me. 'She must have been a visitor,' he said.

"And it was eight months before I saw her again.

"Then one January morning, during a spell of Siberian cold, I was on my way down the Boulevard Malesherbes and running to warm myself, when at the corner of a street I collided so violently with a woman that she dropped a small parcel.

"I began to apologize. It was she!

"For a moment I stood still, stunned by the suddenness of the shock; then, giving her back the parcel she had been carrying in her hand, I said abruptly:

"I am distressed and overjoyed, madame, to have bumped into you like this. Would you believe that for more than two years I have noticed you, admired you, longed cruelly to make your acquaintance, and I could not manage to find out who you were or where you lived? Pardon words like these, ascribe them to my passionate desire to be numbered among those who have the right to speak to you. Such a feeling could not wrong you, could it? You do not know me. I am Baron Roger des Annettes. Make your own inquiries: you will be told that I am a man you can admit to your house. If you refuse my request now, you will make me the most miserable wretch alive. I implore you, be kind, give me, allow me the chance to visit you.'

"She regarded me intently, with her strange dead eyes, and answered, smiling:

"Give me your address. I will come to your house.'

"I was so utterly dumbfounded that I must have shown it. But I am never long in recovering from such shocks and I hastened to give her a card, which she slipped into her pocket with a swift gesture, with a hand evidently used to manipulating clandestine letters.

"Becoming bold, I stammered:

"When will I see you?'

"She hesitated, as though she had to make a complicated calculation, no doubt trying to recollect just what she had to do with each hour of her time; then she murmured:



"Sunday morning, is that all right for you?"

"I am quite sure that it is all right."

"Then she went away, after she had searched my face, judged me, summed me up, dissected me with that heavy insensible stare that seemed to leave something on one's skin, a kind of viscous fluid, as if her glance flung out onto human beings one of those dense liquids that devilish use to cloud the water and lull their prey to sleep.

"Until Sunday, I gave myself up to the most desperate cudgeling of my wits, in the effort to make up my mind what she was and ascertain the correct attitude to take with her.

"Should I pay her? How?"

"I decided to buy a piece of jewelry, an uncommonly charming piece of jewelry too, and I placed it, in its case, on the mantel.

"I waited for her, after a restless night.

"She arrived about ten o'clock, quite calm, quite placid, and gave me her hand as if we were old friends. I offered her a seat, I relieved her of her hat, her veil, her furs, her muff. Then, slightly embarrassed, I began to press her somewhat more amorously, for I had no time to lose.

"She asked for nothing better, and we had not exchanged twenty words before I began to undress her. She herself continued this ticklish business that I never succeed in finishing: I prick myself on pins, I twist strings into inextricable knots instead of undoing them; I mismanage and confuse everything, I delay it all and I lose my head.

"Do you know any moment in life, my dear friend, more marvelous than the moments when you are watching — standing just far enough away and using just enough discretion to avoid startling that modesty all women affect — a woman who is stripping herself for you of all the rustling garments that fall round her feet, one after another?

"And what is prettier than the gestures with which they take off those adorable garments that slip to the ground, empty and stretched indolently as though they had just been struck dead? How glorious and intoxicating is the revelation of her flesh, her naked arms and breasts after her bodice is off, and how disturbing the lines of her body glimpsed under the last veil of all!

"But all at once I saw an amazing thing, a black stain between her shoulders, for she had turned her back to me: a wide stain standing out vividly, black as night. I had promised, moreover, not to look at her.

"What was it? I did not have the slightest doubt what it was, however, and the memory of that clearly visible mustache, the eyebrows joined above the eyes, the abundant hair that covered her head like a helmet, ought to have prepared me for this shock.



"I was nonetheless dumbfounded and haunted with strange visions and reminiscences. I imagined that I was looking at one of those enchantresses from the *Thousand and One Nights*, one of those fatal and faithless creatures who exist only to drag mortal men into unknown abysses. I thought of Solomon making the Queen of Sheba walk over a mirror to assure himself that she did not have a cloven hoof.

"And . . . and when it came to the point of singing her my song of love, I discovered that I had no voice left, not even a trickle of sound, my dear. Or let's say I had a voice like a eunuch, which at first astonished and at last thoroughly displeased her, for she remarked, clothing herself with all dispatch:

"There was not much point in putting me to this trouble, was there?"

"I wanted her to accept the ring bought for her, but she said so deliberately and haughtily: 'What do you take me for, monsieur?' that I crimsoned to the ears under this accumulation of humiliations. And she departed without adding another word.

"And that is all there is to my adventure. But the worst of it is that, now, I am in love with her, and madly in love.

"I cannot see a woman without thinking of her. All others repel me, disgust me, unless they resemble her. I cannot press a kiss on another cheek without seeing her cheek beside the one that I am caressing and without suffering agonies from the unappeased desire that torments me.

"She is present at all my rendezvous, at all the caresses that she spoils for me and renders hateful to me. She is always there, clothed or naked, my real mistress; she is there, pressed close to the other woman, standing or lying down, visible and unattainable. And I believe now that she was indeed a woman under a spell, bearing between her shoulders a mysterious talisman.

"Who is she? Even now I do not know. I have met her twice again. I bowed to her. She made not the slightest return to my greeting, she pretended not to know me at all. Who is she? An Asiatic perhaps? Most likely an Eastern Jewess. Yes, a Jewess. I am convinced she is a Jewess. But why? Yes, why indeed? I do not know."

Originally published as "L'Inconnue" (1885).



# ***Selections***

by Catulle Mendès

---

Translated by Rachel Ashton

Introduction

by Barbara Spackman



# Recycling Baudelaire: The Decadence of Catulle Mendès (1841–1909)

by Barbara Spackman

A Petrarchist of the horrible, Mario Praz called him.<sup>1</sup> Catulle Mendès (1841–1909) liked to think of himself in rather more dignified terms, as one of the originators and the official historian of the group of poets known as the Parnassiens, as the founder of its first journal, the *Revue fantaisiste*, as chronicler of the Paris Commune, and as a prolific novelist, playwright, and poet. And prolific he was, producing more than thirty-five collections of short stories, sixteen novels, eleven collections of verse, and thirteen plays, in addition to his history of the “Parnasse contemporain,” a journal kept during the days of the Paris Commune, a history of French poetry from 1867 to 1900 written as a report to the Ministry of Public Instruction, translations, *libretti*, and occasional writings. But in Praz’s assessment, Mendès’s fiction reads like scraps from the Baudelairean table, recycled, and retailed. The titles of his novels and short stories echo those of the novels that, Praz notes, Baudelaire had planned to write: while Baudelaire had planned “The Teaching of a Monster,” “The Monsters,” “The Virgin Mistress,” and “The Lesbians,” Mendès wrote *Monstres parisiens*, *Le Roi vierge*, *La Première maîtresse*, and, in homage to his namesake, *Lesbia*. In at least one of the stories collected in *Monstres parisiens*, Mendès renders explicit this Baudelairean genealogy. Mendès’s “Le Mangeur de rêve” recalls both “Un Mangeur d’opium” and “Le Poème du haschisch” of Baudelaire’s *Les Paradis artificiels*, in which the intoxication of the hashish eater, like that of the wine drinker or convalescent, gives rise to “the excessive poetic development of man.”<sup>2</sup> Baudelaire’s interest is in the nature of hashish-induced reverie, as he carefully monitors the phases and effects of altered consciousness. Mendès instead begins at the end of Baudelaire’s meditation and concentrates on the morning after. His hashish eater is no longer an artist but a drug addict whose social circumstances, more than his consciousness, have been altered by hashish, that “false key to paradise.”<sup>3</sup> His virility no more than a “limp rag,” out of work and to his shame supported by a woman, the drug addict is “not only imbecile, but base.” Mendès literalizes the slow suicide to which Baudelaire had compared the use of hashish by



predicting the suicide of his already-cadaverous wretch, sure to be found one day a drowned man with a small portion of the dreadful green paste in his pocket. The story patches together Baudelairean themes — everation and intoxication — with an ideological glue absent from Baudelaire's texts. In Baudelaire, those elements add up to an approximation of genius; in Mendès, to financial ruin. Mendès's moralism, sometimes straight and sometimes tongue-in-cheek, smacks of petty-bourgeois concerns foreign to Baudelaire.

The Baudelairean inheritance makes itself felt in one of Mendès's most interesting works, the 1890 *Méphistophéla* (chapter six is included in this reader). Decadent themes and strategies are layered together with moralizing reminders in this novel that treats one of the most explosive of decadent themes: lesbianism.<sup>4</sup> What is interesting and potentially subversive about *Méphistophéla* is the amount of space given over to idyllic descriptions of love and sensuality between women. The novel recounts the story of Sophie and Emmeline, childhood friends whose affection evolves "naturally," set always against a backdrop of forests and gardens, chirping birds and bubbling streams. Sophie's attraction to Emmeline is portrayed as primary and spontaneous; though she understands its implications only after having been married off to Emmeline's brother, who rapes her on their wedding night and then, when he finds Sophie keeping a dreamy vigil over Emmeline's bedside the same night, whips her brutally, the attraction is not presented as a turning away from some other, more primary one — and hence not, at least etymologically, as a perversion. The novel scoffs at the self-satisfied ignorance of Jean, the bourgeois husband of Sophie and brother of Emmeline ("how do they do it, he wonders,"<sup>5</sup>), by staging the scene of their first lovemaking as cut short not by the lack Jean imagines but by Sophie's lack of technical know-how, a lack that will later be remedied permanently by a more experienced female lover. It thus sets the stage for a scene that is almost *de rigueur* in decadent texts, the Medusan moment of the revelation of "woman's castration." But in the place of such a revelation, Mendès puts a lack that is nowhere inscribed on the body of woman and that does not insert her into an economy of absolute difference.

This strand of the narrative, which belongs to the category of decadent themes and strategies that rework figurations of sexual difference, is layered between other decadent themes whose function it is here to domesticate, recode, and demonize the representation of lesbianism. Like Huysmans's *Des Esseintes*, Sophie is the end of a degenerating genealogical line; her father, the paralyzed, silent last heir of



an "abject race," passes on to her the macabre "Laugh" that will ring in her ears as a sign of her damnation. Medical discourse, so important to the rhetoric of decadence, is enlisted as male doctors are introduced halfway through the narrative to diagnose and recode Sophie, now renamed Sophor, as monstrous and sick. Female demons and black sabbaths make their appearance in the vision that will haunt Sophor after the deathbed conversion of her first lover, Magalo. In a strategy more befitting the *feuilleton*, Magalo returns from a momentary death to recommend the tenderness of heterosexual marriage (which the novel itself, however, shows to be either violence and rape or the product of bovine bourgeois mediocrity) in the place of what she now "knows" is "dirty," criminal, and a false pleasure (another false key to paradise). As if aware of how unconvincing Magalo's conversion appears to be, the narrative reinforces its religious condemnation with Sophor's vision of a Lesbian sabbath, in which a multitude of beautiful sorceresses and possessed women, Maenads, Naiads, Romans, and marquises said "the mass blaspheming virile love" (p. 830), chanting to the Lesbian goddess: "Smile, ineffable Mistress, on those who scorn the conjugal bed and curse the cradle!" (p. 832). Knife-wielding women present the genitals of newborn males as an offering to the Goddess, who in return displays her sex like a monstrosity and ushers in wild pigs who eat the "bleeding future of the human race" (p. 832). The climax comes when Sophor, elected by the Goddess to receive communion, advances among the waves of transported women to witness the opening of the diabolical monstrosity, and see the "host" itself, "vertiginous entry to the abyss" (p. 834). This is the Medusan moment that was "missing" in the earlier scene, and Sophor's gaze and desire are petrified by the sight. The passage reads like Huysmans at his most deliriously misogynist and functions to recode as demonic a relation that the novel presents elsewhere as the natural flowering of sensuality. A final layer is added at both the beginning and the end of the novel; like the covers of a book, the preface and afterword echo the same words to describe Sophor at the end of her life. Now a morphine addict, "mummy of remorse," and "pale empress of some macabre Lesbos," Sophor is held up as an admonitory example whose lesson is simple and clear: "the woman who virilizes herself definitively, dehumanizes herself."<sup>6</sup> In the final word of the novel, Sophie, already once renamed Sophor (one suspects because of its closer resemblance to "Sappho"), is renamed "Méphistophéla."

The ideological stratification of the novel, when seen in cross-section, reveals the ideological foundation of the decadents' celebra-



tion of androgyny. No clearer counterexample could be imagined to the feminization of man whose androgyny Baudelaire yoked to genius, or to the decadents' call to arms as it appeared in the journal that made them a movement, Anatole Baju's *Le Décadent*: "Man becomes more refined, more feminine, more divine."<sup>7</sup> The feminized man becomes divine, the virilized woman, less than human if not demonic. In its permutations of decadent themes, Mendès's novel confirms the feminist suspicion that fin-de-siècle androgyny is a one-way street, an appropriation of the feminine by the masculine rather than a pacific reconciliation of opposites.

The stories in *Monstres parisiens* are considerably tamer than the extravagant *Méphistophéla*. These are the kinds of stories that D'Annunzio's male characters tell at midnight suppers, in the company of tipsy *demi-mondaines*: decadent gossip and salacious innuendo, meant to seduce and titillate. No catalog of decadent themes and strategies would be complete without vampiric women and sexual deviants, and Mendès does not disappoint. Sexuality is constituted in and through transgression, and the transgressions are predictable ones. In "La Demoiselle Noire," necrophilia joins the death rattle and the groans of love. In "La Femme de chambre," a vampiric maid seems to suck the life from her young mistress — an ironic reversal of the nature of class relations. In "L'Ogresse," pedophilia is topped with fetishism in the tale of a woman who finds the narrator's kisses all the more exciting with schoolchildren looking on; after discovering her secret, her shocked and soon thereafter former lover sends her in homage a worn Latin grammar, officially authorized for the *lycée*, contained inside an Easter egg. In the story by the same name, the teenaged "Léa" seduces her stepfather out of revenge. What marks this story as particularly decadent is not the theme of incest, of course, but rather the attribution of her motives to hereditary tendencies, to atavistic urges of the sort that Lombroso documented in *The Female Offender*: "children like her must have been Roman empresses and the bloodthirsty courtesans of the Iron Age. One of her ancestors, in Brazil — for she is of the Portuguese race — was a crude flayer of negroes, a hanger of mulattas" ("Léa," 48). The genealogical overkill of the story turns a mere Lolita into a throwback and dominatrix, in an effort to add a frisson to what, for the decadents, was standard fare.

The stories in *Monstres parisiens* are tales about women meant to strengthen the homosocial economy. The lesbian theme is an undercurrent, disavowed yet present in the very title of the collection. In "Les Protectrices," an older woman, Mme de Ruremonde, explains to



her younger friend and student, Mme de Courtisols, the system of protectresses and protégées that establishes relations between upper- and lower-class women, respectable women and *filles*, a sort of fin-de-siècle mentoring. It's like having your own horse or jockey to bet on, explains Mme de Ruremonde, for no intimacy of any sort can possibly be imagined between such women and ourselves. Even Sappho, she continues, was in love not with Lysistrata but with Phaon, the boatman: "she was calumniated by some envious poet who published the 'Athenian Monsters'" ("Les Protectrices," p. 41). The fictional genealogy that the text provides for itself thus suggests that *Monstres parisiens* takes calumny as its model, and more specifically calumny of women. And indeed almost all these Parisian "monsters" are women; the few men among them are feminized in a decidedly non-Baudelairean way: the sign that George, of "George et Nonotte," has hit rock bottom is that he is financially dependent on a woman, and an occasional prostitute at that; the same is true of the "Le Mangeur de rêve." Only Mme de Ruremonde and Mme de Courtisols might be open to the specific sort of "calumny" that Sappho supposedly suffered. The two characters reappear in "L'Imitatrice," in which Mme de Courtisols, a theatrical impersonator, confesses to her elder friend her love for the man who, it turns out, has been Mme de Ruremonde's lover for some years. In a scenario reminiscent of the bed tricks of Renaissance narrative, the two women agree that the younger woman will take the place of the older in the lover's bed and use her talent as impersonator to mimic Mme de Ruremonde's voice. But a worry arises: What if, in the moments of supreme passion, Mme de Courtisols falls out of character? How can she imitate a voice of passion that she has never heard? The problem is solved simply by truncating the triangle and substituting one substitution for another: the impersonator imitates the sound of the man's voice so that Mme de Ruremonde can demonstrate the sound of her own ecstasy. In good Girardian form, the rivals become, in mime at least, lovers. The narrative stops short of recounting the scene between the two women, eliding it in the space between paragraphs, and skips ahead to read the success of their test run in the male lover's ignorance.

The women need not have gone to such lengths, of course, for in the *Monstres parisiens* it is not that hard to fool men on this count. The difficulty — for male fantasy — of telling one woman from another, the honest woman from the prostitute, provides the basis for the variations on vice in several of the stories. One cannot tell one *fille* from another, according to this nineteenth-century obsession, and with



good linguistic reason: an entire narrative unfolds from the meanings of *fille* in French, from female child to daughter to girl, to virgin and servant, then prostitute and spinster. *Monstres parisiens* exploits the commonplaces contained in this linguistic and ideological polysemy. In the opening story, "La Pénitente," a baroness alights a carriage, corset in hand, on her way home from an adulterous night: "in this respect she resembled those little early-morning tarts" ("La Pénitente," p. 2) one sees rushing along the streets. The conflation of respectable baroness and early-morning tart is seconded by the conflation of another structuring opposition in the story, that of sacred and profane. In a typically decadent move — one is reminded of the refunctioning of ecclesiastical objects in the decorating schemes of Huysmans or D'Annunzio — the black-and-pink satin corset first seen in the baroness's hand is later abandoned in a confessional, streaked here and there with the makeup of the "penitent." In the second story, "Le Lâche," a respectable young woman leaves her husband for a first rendezvous with a lover who, far more experienced than she, advises her to return home after their lovemaking. Shocked and offended to be treated as a fallen woman, she protests that she is "not at all like those women" (pp. 13–14), those women who are "pointed out," and to prove so secretly sends word to her husband who dutifully arrives on the scene to kill them both. The moral of the story seems to be that such a distinction is not one that can be made among the living.

The third story in the collection, "The Lover of His Wife" (included in this volume), takes up the fantasized impossibility of distinguishing the *femme* from the *fille* by making the *femme* the *fille*: the wife is the prostitute. The story takes the stereotype of the desperate man who has ruined his life for the sake of a wanton woman, in this case an ugly, old, made-up extra in the theater, and turns it on itself: the *fille* who holds him in thrall is the legitimate wife and mother of his children. In a reversal of the topos of the enchantress-turned-hag (a beautiful young woman entices, only to reveal herself to be an ancient, painted whore), the hag has become the enchantress.

Mendès tries out yet another permutation in "The Newlywed" (included in this volume). From their wedding bed, the bride offers the groom an ultimatum rather than an embrace: one secret lover or twenty in the open. If he forces himself on her and requires her to fulfill her wifely obligations, she vows to throw herself at the first man she encounters; if not, she will be discreet with the lover who waits outside and no one will know that she is anything other than an *honnête femme*. The opposition between *femme* and *fille* is here married



to the opposition between appearance and reality; if forced to be the wife, she will appear to be the whore; if allowed to be an adulteress, she will appear to be the wife. The story is the most highly rhetorical in the *Monsters*, in the sense that it foregrounds recognizable figures and strategies of argumentation: blazon, dilemma, antithesis, and paro-moiosis; "I could have been a strumpet, but I prefer to make you a cuckold" (p. 839). It seems almost to be an exercise, however wooden, in the genre of epideictic: blame of the husband is followed by praise first of money and then of the lover who waits below. Oratorical display thus takes the place of sexual display in the wedding bed. The substitution is a suggestive one that, in the hands of a D'Annunzio, would function as the fetishization of rhetoric itself. Here, however, the oratorical display points to a characteristic of decadent texts that is missing from Mendès's prose: that glittering verbal surface, inlaid with intertextual references and formed into patterns of arcane rhetorical figures and strategies.

The *Monstres parisiens* are indeed standard fare for the fin de siècle, deprived of the rhetorical and ideological complexity of the decadent "classics." At its worst, it marks the point at which decadence fades and declines into soft porn. At its best, as in the reshuffling of themes and strategies in *Méphistophéla*, Mendès's work uncovers the foundations of the commonplaces dear to the decadents.

---

#### NOTES

1. Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 153.

2. Charles Baudelaire, *Les Paradis artificiels*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), vol. 1, p. 397.

3. Catulle Mendès, "Le Mangeur de rêve," *Monstres parisiens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1882), p. 85. All further references will be to this edition and will appear in the text.

4. Catulle Mendès, *Méphistophéla* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1890). A translation of chapter six is included in this volume and will be cited parenthetically.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

7. Pierre Vareilles, "Le progrès," in Anatole Baju (ed.), *Le Décadent*, no. 1 (April 10, 1886; facsimile edition, Paris: L'arche du livre, 1970-73), n.p.







## CONTENTS

CHAPTER SIX FROM <i>MÉPHISTOPHÉLA</i> .....	825
THE LOVER OF HIS WIFE.....	834
THE NEWLYWED .....	837



# MÉPHISTOPHÉLA

## CHAPTER SIX

AWAY FROM THAT doleful bedchamber, away from that respectful consent that being near the dead demands, once more finding herself amid the lively commotion of the street, and even back home in the familiar apartment, far from the unexpected and the extraordinary, becoming cocooned again within the world of familiar habits, Sophor did not feel free from Magalo's words: "It's dirty, it's forbidden." Sitting in a low armchair, her head bowed, her hands clasped between her legs, she could hear those words again; she could see the admonisher who, in her dying breath, momentarily revived, had told her in such an unfamiliar voice things she would never have deemed her capable of thinking. Ah! How much the whole town's reprobation weighed on her — this Mme d'Hermeline knew well. To all men and to all women (she was aware of the terror of her own accomplices), she was a sort of monster. That was fine, she did not care! She ridiculed their scorn and hatred, she took their insults as compliments. But the dying woman's reproach had been so unexpected, it had shocked her, forced her to imagine things. It was so odd, so impossible, that Magalo, who had such a puerile mind, had voluntarily proffered this advice and these threats. It seemed as if they had been dictated by someone mysterious and terrible. Sophor felt anxious; it was as if she had seen a child, who had been playing just one moment before, tracing alarming prophecies on the wall. Then another thought came to torment her. It was truly bizarre that the condemnation of her only pleasure had been uttered by the woman to whom she owed the knowledge of it. And, however reckless and frivolous she had appeared in the past to Sophor, Magalo, who had initiated her into this delectable mystery, was still somehow able to desecrate it.

But then, standing up suddenly, she burst out laughing! With her hair pushed back — her red-and-black hair like dark gold — she looked in the mirror at the triumphant pride of her youth and beauty.

She grew pale. It seemed as if her own laughter resembled another's she had heard more than once before.



Come now, she was going mad. What silly thoughts was she dwelling on? That is what looking after the ill and watching people die does to you. Death leaves a shadow as it passes that does not immediately disperse. You have to break out of the darkness and reemerge into daylight. Yes, it was deplorable that Magalo, so pretty before, had become such an ugly little corpse. Heh! the memory of the dead need not encumber the living. Living people have the right, whilst they forget the tomb, to light, to love, to life. And Sophor, freed from vain apprehension, paced back and forth across the room, warm and happy, with her eyes full of defiance.

She sat down at an ebony and plush table with an inkwell, some quills, and a few sheets of paper. She wrote rapidly, smiling, with pride in her eyes and her lip curled back in a haughty smile. Having finished eight or ten notes, she rang the bell and said to the chambermaid: "Have these letters delivered immediately. I am having some people to dinner. Have the table set up in the hall." Then, alone once again, she recommenced her pacing. Occasionally she would stop in front of the mirror, her face radiant with beautiful arrogance.

Dirty! The dying woman had uttered that absurd word! Were women's blooming lips and cool, bare breasts dirty? Were beautiful arms dirty, bathed in scented water, like living censers exuding perfumes as fervent as incense at the altar and myrrh in the tabernacle? What is foul indeed is male rutting and brutal, bestial deflowering with its sweating efforts and its finales of nauseated desire. And, since virile embraces end in the filth of fecundity, conjugal nights are the execrable terror of the pure dream of love. But complete chasteness, complete tenderness blossoms in that double flower formed by the mouths of two virgins in love. Then, without rancor, without remorse, and without distressing exhaustion, ineffable rapture, perpetuated by insatiable desire, haunts the beds of female lovers devoted to divine and sterile embraces. And in such unions, like snow on snow, perfume on perfume, one caressing wave on the wave it follows and surmounts, awakens the foreknowledge of some still-unrevealed paradise where the Eternal Feminine consecrates the marriages of ecstatic angels. But what good is this paradise since, on this earth, out of the bog of virility, the beautiful flesh and the souls of female lovers rejoice in all their modesty and passion?

And Magalo had also said "forbidden!" An even more foolish idea, worthy of such a mediocre and banal creature, falsely eccentric, bourgeois in reality despite her wild bohemian appearance, whose dearth of pride had brought about a fear of revolt, admiration for anything ordinary, and a need for reflection in life and forgiveness beyond it,



with which, one day or another, all souls without true courage are tormented. Forbidden by whom? Doesn't every desire bring with it, in the man or woman who experiences it, the right to obey? Isn't everything that is desirable made to be possessed? The will has a right to empowerment. The hungry have the right to eat; the thirsty, to drink; and living people are dupes of life, if life opposes their instincts with the interdiction or the impossibility of accomplishment. Being born means acquiring the right to full personal development. The Creator incurred a debt to this, his own creature. I am, therefore I demand. The appetency that was put inside me together with this breath that I did not demand, obliges he who gave it to me to satisfy it. We are the creditors of Providence. Even yielding to its law is more than a right, it is a duty. Being predestined, we must live according to our destiny; and the only thing that is forbidden — if the necessity for crime is within us — is not to be criminal. Anyway, what is the crime? Ah, yes! The sterility of our embraces seems to contradict the natural rule. Loving in order to bear children appears to order the age-old succession of races. Man engenders, woman bears children, and these grow up to engender or to bear children in their turn. But now there are women rebelling against the fate of their sex, and, although it is exceptional, their innate vocation is no less legitimate. Perhaps even, since they are so rare, they are the favorites of creative power. The most beautiful flowers do not bloom on all bushes, and magnificent and noble animals wander the earth in rare couples. Whatever pullulates, whatever abounds, is diminutive and vile. There are thousands of millions of insects for every wild beast. Termites are innumerable, the lion is magnificent.

These ideas had been stirring within her for hours, when, later that evening, the chambermaid returned.

"Mademoiselle Roselia Fingely has arrived," she said.

"Good. Ask her to wait for me. Have the candelabra and chandeliers in the hall lit."

Sophor returned to her daydreaming.

And if there was something forbidden, if desire did not always bring with it legitimate realization, would it not be noble to rebel against the interdiction? To transgress was human, and how gloriously audacious humanity was! To break the law and risk punishment is to go one better than the judge. To say no to God is to become a sort of God oneself. The being that differentiates himself from what he ought to be recreates himself, equals his creator, and what is more, does so with the pride of an obstacle conquered. Women falling in love with men is the primitive rule that nothing opposes; women falling in love with



women is a new rule, more superb for having conquered the first. The proudest conquest is not the possession of a deserted land but a violent usurpation after the original occupants have been pursued and scattered. It is loftier to build on defeat.

The chambermaid reappeared.

"Madame Nordrecht is here, and Mademoiselle Luce Lucy."

"Show them to the table, I am coming."

Besides, licit or forbidden, glorious or base, she had not implanted within herself the furious and triumphant desire that so alarmed people's consciences. With the haughtiness of a Spanish heroine, she thought: "I am what I am!" But she had not made herself what she was. The fire's excuse is always the spark that ignites it. She had developed involuntarily, like a flower coming into bloom. It is the sower and not the field who is responsible for the grain. Some women consent to marriage peacefully, accepting the humility of being a wife and the bestiality of being a mother. She was not one of those! While monstrous, at least in the public's eyes, she had not invented her monstrosity. At most she was an accomplice to her own sins — sins, so be it! — since she had received the compelling order to commit them. She was proud to obey a strange law, but she did obey, like the helplessly zealous slave of an omnipotent master. Happy in her sin, it was not she who had chosen it. And if, rather than be indebted to it for her greatest rapture, she had been the victim instead of the guilty party, then she would have had the right to bemoan her criminality! But she did not complain, since her covetousness was in harmony with the impossibility of resisting, and since a woman's breasts and thighs were the divine altars of her dreams.

The chambermaid came in again.

"All of Madame the Baroness's guests have arrived," she said.

"Have dinner served. I shall join them. I just have to change my dress."

Had Magalo not talked of the devil? Well! Yes, and why not? It was possible that Sophor had some rebellious angel inside her. She admitted that she was possessed, but by what a glorious, what a delectable demon! A Lucifer as heroic as Penthesilea and as subtle as a Parisian, advising all daring innovations and teaching all stratagems. She was mighty and yet so subtle! The sort of God who, because she was a woman, was a devil. And if she had true substance, she would have thousands of mouths all over her body, always open and stretched toward scented, honeyed lips. She was the fury of a kiss, the need for embraces and breathless surrender. She knew words that disturbed, disconcerted, maddened. She was the adviser of enfolding and overwhelming gestures. She had put into Sophor's eyes the mad ambition to seize and possess the eyes of beauti-



ful women, her hands their flesh, her teeth their teeth, her heart their breast! And it was to her that she owed the pride to look the indignant crowds in the face, not to lower her head under their gazes full of scorn or hatred, and to wear their opprobrium like a sparkling diadem.

The doors opened sharply, through which came laughter and the chinking of crystal:

"Ah! Will you hurry up? Are you coming or not? Dinner will be over and there are only crayfish left, no more sweet dishes, no more Vivette!" said Honorine Lamblin, very pale and plump, under the candelabra she held with her bare arm.

Sophor said:

"I'm coming."

With a violent gesture, she tore open her bodice, shook her hair, lifted up her warrior's arms, exuding the scent of warm sweat, and all undone, her face glowing, she entered the hall that sparkled with gold and brocade, set alight by twenty torches multiplied by the luminous mirrors. Around the table abundantly strewn with peonies and red roses, beautiful and amorous girls, amid the chandeliers' crystalline and glassy radiance, were eating, drinking, laughing, uttering wild words that brought to her lips the memories and the hope of kisses. Almost all of them rose when they saw her enter. Voices called out to her, hands seized her and tugged at her amid a commotion of silky fabrics that rustled against their skin. Yvonne Lérays, always drunk before everyone else, had unfastened her corset, the tips of her little boyish breasts pointing out like pink spearheads. She exuded a scent of sandalwood, stronger than usual because of the heat, enhanced by the smell of ginger. Valentine Berthier had taken onto her knee Vivette Chanlieu, who was lying back, displaying the gold of her gipsy skin above her black shoes. Those who were not drunk were very nearly so. Sophor stood there, all the laughter, all the fragrance and splendor of hair and flesh converging on her, passionately contemplating the subjects of her supreme desire. Without sitting down she took from Valentine Berthier's hands a glass of Bohème, as large as a wiederkom, overflowing with froth. She drained it, filled it with champagne, and emptied it once more. The wine imbued her with a feeling of warmth, glowed in her eyes, and made her lips flare. She wanted more to drink and ordered them to follow her example. Of what did she need to rid her mind? Was she still preoccupied by Magalo's sinister gossip? Was she not entirely persuaded of the beauty of her pleasures and her right to possess them? She emptied the great glass a fourth time, not without some effort. And here, amid the smell of meat and flesh, amid the furious brilliance of lamps



and candelabra making shoulders, faces, and throats shimmer with golden flames, amid the ardent tumult of this troupe of girls, whose kisses rang out immodestly, the Baroness Sophor d'Hermelinge saw before her the vision of a delectable and formidable sabbath where a multitude of beautiful witches and possessed women chanted the mass blaspheming virile love. The great hall with its black marble columns stretched out like a temple lit up for some glorious ceremony. At the back, a raised dresser full of gold plate and silver candlesticks resembled a radiant altar, and from the walls, opened up by some omnipotent spell, advanced young women in pairs. Although they resembled Germaine Trièzin, Rose Mousson, Séraphine Thévenet, or Vivette Chanlieu, they were not wearing Parisian dress. Some, as if they had come from the distant past, had faces and breasts painted with a yellow dye, smelling of saffron, and their naked legs, beneath their transparent lamé muslin, had little bells at the ankles like the Gandharvas of Indra's paradise. They were guiding tame panthers on leashes. Others, who were brandishing thyrses or playing castanets, were dressed in scarlet torn in drunkenness like the bacchantes seen in paintings. Others, bearing lilies and doves in baskets, resembled naiads from damp caves, dressed in cloth woven from vegetation and air, or from the mist floating over springs. Behind these came Aragonese ladies in red satin and black lace, their shoulders thrown back so much it seemed they might snap, Romans with matt skin and two fiery craters for eyes, capped with ebony hair, advancing at a slow march, as if sleeping in the lingering laziness of siestas in the sun. Mad marchionesses with white heads like snowballs, their lips the color of pimentos, with a beauty spot at the corner of their mouths, confounding any theories about blue and pale nuns, clasping their hands under their lowered veils; the mysteriousness of nocturnal caresses in the shadow of their cells or in the colonnades of cloisters around moon-whitened graveyards enveloping them in pensive silence. Still others processed out of the open walls toward the sanctuary. When the crowd looked like a dense field, with their beautiful hair resembling red and black ears of corn, all the women together uttered a great cry. In the wildness of a joy so violent it resembled anger, they began to veer toward the altar, running and leaping. The whole temple rang out under their feet. Whirling endlessly to a furious rhythm, they called out, shouted evocations, or, at times, more softly, chanted strange litanies in monotonous voices:

"Thou who delightest in nocturnal solitude peopled with dreams and invisible caresses! Thou who destestest marriage and holdest it up to ridicule!



"Thou who teachest young women the enchantment of exchanging their beauty for its living image, fooling their husbands, and complimenting their Sisters!

"Thou who leanest over the beds of virgins who are still ignorant of perfect joy, and guidest the hesitant caresses of their sleepy hands toward the awakening of desire!

"Thou who art temptation and salvation! Thou who hath invented a hell sweeter than paradise, and who, for our rapture, hath given a woman's fragrance to all the flowers in the garden, a woman's gaze to all the stars in the sky!

"Thou hast advised Oceanads to share the fluid bed of a single wave, and beautiful courtesan empresses to drink the drop of blood from golden needles with which they pearled the breasts of African slaves, and Parisian women to bathe in pairs in narrow tubs of cracked porcelain!

"Enemy of marriage, blasphemer of fertile beds, who takest pleasure in flat stomachs and unwrinkled throats, exquisite and great Demoness, our recourse and our terror, appear on the altar, Demoness.

"So that all of us can passionately adore thy goat's feet scented by the hair of queens, with our lips joined in pairs, our arms entwined and our chests bared, our whole bodies shaken by an ardent round dance!

"We form a vast garland of living flowers around thee, out of which all the brown, blond, and auburn scents, delectable to thy nostrils, mount like incense up to thy starry head!"

And then, out of a cloud of smoke that tore like a veil appeared on the altar a colossal form. Had she emerged from the depths of hell? Had she descended from the clear nocturnal Empyrean? She was black, red, and golden. She stood there, diabolical, celestial, and prodigious. She was terrible in the enormity of her grace and yet seductive in the boundlessness of her terror. You could just make out the form of the tortured enchantress. And, dominating the voices of the kneeling Sisters, her laughter — Sophor recognized it! — rang out like a victory bell. A woman by her heavy long hair, her mysterious gaze, and her lips as bright as a blood red kiss, a beast by the golden coat that covered her arms and legs, and by her goat's feet; she was the female Satan of a sabbath without men, and while on her horned forehead, like a female satyr's, glowed a strange diadem of dark diamonds suggesting a constellation of accursed stars, the Demoness with divine eyes, gathering up to her navel her gold-and-scarlet dress, immodestly displayed and proffered, like a monstrosity for their adoration, her tawny sex!

Then the lovers, reaching out their arms, waving their perfumed hair at her:



"Smile, ineffable Mistress, on those who scorn the conjugal bed and curse the cradle!

"When we walk through the town, young men signal us to follow them and want to take us by the hand. But, ridiculing the thick beard that dishonors their chins, we turn instead toward our friends with quivering lips barely covered with golden down.

"Smile, ineffable Mistress, on those who scorn the conjugal bed and curse the cradle!

"Lovers throw themselves at our feet, kiss our knees, then, despairing at our refusal, strike themselves with a blade that enters right through their hearts. And we smile, dreaming of the pretty ruby bracelets we can give our Friend made from the drops oozing from their wounds.

"Smile, ineffable Mistress, on those who scorn the conjugal bed and who curse the cradle!

"We have explored all the paths of rapturous excess. By dint of sincere ardor or deceitful caresses we have obliged even the most resistant to avow their perfect ecstasy. For we are the wild and discerning ones.

"Smile, ineffable Mistress, on those who scorn the conjugal bed and who curse the cradle!

"However, if there are labors and joys that are still unknown to us, reveal them to your fervent followers who deserve to be taught them, O instigator of fond sins! Admit one of us to the agonizing delight of communion, so that, full of thee and becoming thine image, she will teach us thine art and thy will.

"Smile, ineffable Mistress, on those who scorn the conjugal bed and who curse the cradle!"

But the Demoness did not lower her gaze upon the supplicants. Her fierce eyes, like hollows of red gold in the concentrated light shining from her diadem, were full of the impatience of a god awaiting the pleasure of a belated offering.

Through the parted crowd, dressed not in linen or silk but in fresh red blood, advanced women with knives in their hands. They were like sacrificers still scarlet from a hecatomb. Behind them you could hear mothers fleeing and shrieking loudly, holding their babies in their arms! The bloody women extended toward the altar baskets in which palpitated the virile members of newborn boys. They strewed these offerings like bizarre flowers at the feet of the Demoness. The latter made a sign. And suddenly, emerging with grunts and growls, wild pigs rushed forward and invaded the altar, and, while the living idol was laughing tremendously, they ate the bleeding future of the human race.



Then the satisfied Mistress indicated with a glance the one to whom the communion would be given, and to whom new secrets would be revealed so that she could teach them in her turn. And it was Sophor who, amid the waving fragrant hair, climbed gloriously up the altar steps toward the splendid, tawny monstenance. All the lovers were prostrate, their heads to the floor, like the faithful still unworthy of contemplating the celebration of supreme mysteries, sinking into religious dread. But a canticle rose quietly on their half open lips.

"O triumphant Chosen One! O royal older sister! For thou art chosen from amongst all of us to receive the ineffable host and to spread the Gospel of new caresses.

"We adore thee, and when thou descendest from the altar, we will make steps of our bodies for thy bare feet!

"For she in whom resides all knowledge and all joy accepts thee for her wife and will be thine in return, for she gives herself to thee who givest thyself to her, for she and thee are one in your sacramental office, both communicant and host.

"We adore thee, and when thou descendest from the altar, we will make steps of our bodies for thy bare feet!

"For thou art mingled to the point that if our eyes dared to look up they would see only one august and nuptial form, for her divinity and thy humanity join and combine in a double female unity.

"We adore thee, and when thou descendest from the altar, we will make steps of our bodies for thy bare feet!"

And the Chosen One had indeed changed. Full of the possessed Demoness, she felt herself become her. Black, red, and golden, it was she who stood there, diabolical, celestial, and prodigious. A woman by her heavy long hair, her mysterious gaze, and her lips as bright as a bloodred kiss, a beast by the golden coat that covered her arms and legs, and by her goat's feet, and while on her horned forehead, like a female satyr's, glowed a diadem of dark diamonds like a constellation of accursed stars, she triumphantly proffered from beneath the gold and scarlet the tawny splendor of her monstenance! And the walls vanished. The whole town and all the countryside, the rivers, the mountains, and the distant continents appeared just as Lucifer must have seen them from his lofty star. The universal multitude of virgins, wives, and widows made its way toward the altar. They were chanting, they were dancing, they were joyful, they kissed one another on the mouth. If men tried to hold them back, they set on them and tore them to pieces with laughter, leaving them alongside the pathway, bleeding and dying. They went forever onward. It was like a growing circle of waves pushed by



other waves, gathering in together. And when they approached, they uttered great protests of joy, lifted their hands toward the dark and luminous altar and hurried forward! The Chosen One, all the while, felt herself growing larger and larger, enormous, vast, almost infinite. Under her robe of scarlet and gold now shining like a thundercloud, the diabolical monstrosity stretched out prodigiously, deepening, swirling with fire and storms, and, to the delight of the women stampeding in herds, it was offered up like the vertiginous entry to the abyss.

Originally published in *Méphistophéla* (1890).

## THE LOVER OF HIS WIFE

I WRENCHED THE revolver from his hands, and I said to him:

"You are mad! Are you going to kill yourself?"

He replied sadly:

"I am lost and I am loathsome. Do not pity me! Loathsome, I tell you. If I had only wronged myself, if I had only ruined myself, I would have the courage to live, but the fortune I have squandered in two years (more than a million!) belonged to my son, who is now a grown man, with the right to look at me severely, and to my daughter, who will probably die of grief because without any money she cannot marry the man who loves her. My son's reproaches, my daughter's tears are what I fear and what I flee. Before he speaks, I will be deaf; before she dies, I will be dead. And my affliction is all the more profound, my remorse all the more keen, because the crime that I have committed..."

"Yes, I know," I said.

"All for a whore! But you do not know the whole story. That almost-ugly, already old and heavily made-up, creature that I took on two years ago when she was an extra at the Hippodrome, whose face lies, whose heart lies, whose senses lie, who unrelentingly wallows in vice without pleasure, as if accomplishing a fatal duty. Scum of all the bohemian hovels and of all the go-betweens' sofas. That vile creature for whom I (an honest gentleman!) sacrificed my fortune, my Gontran and Jane and my honor — she is my wife."

"Your wife?"

"Yes. You heard me correctly. My wife, whom I really did marry twenty years ago. My wife. The mother of my son and the mother of my daughter."



He sat down and continued to talk rapidly.

"Eighteen when I married her. More pretty than beautiful, she already had the perverse charm of a mouth that was too red and golden brown eyes in which glinted a strange desire. Left on her own by a young mother who spent all her nights at the ball, what she ought to have been ignorant of she knew thanks to the chambermaids and the books she borrowed. She spoke impertinently and concisely, expertly in slang, broken up by laughter, and, playing the piano in a low-cut dress, she had a very reprehensible way of lifting her bare arm to make her sleeve slide up. Virginity without innocence. Both a tart and a young lady. On our wedding night, when I took her in my carriage to our nuptial chamber, it was as if I were taking her to dine. I found her disenchanted, even before that supreme moment. But I adored her! Because of that singular juxtaposition of immodesty and physical honesty? Because of her cold amorous knowledge, not instinctive, but acquired through bad reading and bad language? Perhaps. Already guilty, it did not matter, I was happy! And everything she wanted, I gave her. She had the most beautiful coaches, the most beautiful horses. Her clothes? Marvels. She played in saucy operettas in the salons, starring half naked in all the tableaux. She was famous for her passion for despising convention. I allowed everything, and I smiled, for my nights were happy. One evening, returning from the club earlier than usual, I saw her sitting on my footman's knee in the antechamber. Well, after I had chased that servant's mistress away like a slave, throwing her I do not know how much money so that she would not have to beg on the streets with my name for a begging bowl, after she had left Paris, then France, with a troupe of traveling actors who were going to sing *La Belle-Hélène* in Rio de Janeiro or in the Argentine republic, after the anger, a great despair seized hold of me, not (oh, how cowardly we are!) because of my deserted home or my tarnished honor, but because she was no longer there in the evening in her pink-and-black corset, before the swing mirror, untying her unruly hair, from which emanated so many perfumes, and letting it flow over her breast! The years flew by, the bad memories faded. Soon I was living happily with the two children she had left me. There is nothing to console the little mouths of laughing children. Oh, what judges were those innocent eyes, but forgiving judges. Where was she? What had become of her? I actually worried about that! Gontran became an alert and determined young man. I tenderly watched Jane grow up with no resemblance to her mother. My whole life was devoted to them, and the more the time passed, the more the things of the past became vague specters, no longer casting



shadows over my thoughts. I would never have thought about she who had been my wife, if, in the end, just as I was about to marry off my daughter, her mother's consent or proof that she was dead had not been necessary. Whence came some successful research. My wife, who had returned to Paris after hundreds of journeys, was starring at the Hippodrome, under a pseudonym, in the pageant of *Riquet à la Houpe*! I was not even sickened, my former tenderness had been dead for so long; I went to see her, armed with the document that she merely had to sign and a few bank notes in my wallet. Cowards, I tell you cowards! That is what we are! Looking older, she had rouge on her cheeks, shadow under her eyes, and a hoarse voice, and although she was lying there in a shapeless dressing gown that so many fingers had unlaced, it made no difference: at the sight of her, all the seeds of my desire fermented in my chest. Still desirable, alas! Perhaps even more desirable thanks to countless unknown lovers and distant affairs. Ah, what a wretch! That day, I did not make her sign the document. The next day I saw her again, and now I see her every day. Broken, defeated, I finally reached the ultimate shame of proposing (to that tart!) that she come back to me and take my name again. I would have allowed her to embrace Jane! She did not want to. Be a married woman? An honest woman? Ah no, that would not have amused her at all! Can you picture her with a grown boy at Saint-Cyr and a daughter to marry? A likely story! Yet (since I had still not forgotten her) she allowed me to visit her sometimes, as a friend. You would have fled, would you not? You would have thrown some unforgivable insult in her face, and you would have fled. Ah, but *you* do not love her! You do not know how much her tainted eyes devour you, and how her lips burn. A week later I was her lover — my wife's lover. And this abominable existence lasted for two years, until yesterday! I was always near her, fighting over her with stable hands, with acrobats, with clowns, giving her money to close the door on them, and open it to me. Money, money, money. Wanting her so much that I always asked: "What do you want?" Ready for all vileness, only to hear her cry, "Come on!" to me as she dismounts. Offering her increasingly large sums of money, paying her friends' debts, selling at a low price in the morning the apartment she desired the day before, bribing the director to give her a big part in a new pantomime. Lost, broken, tearing my conscience to rags, for two years I have been (Just for her kiss! For her old, scrawny courtesan's body!) the stupid fanatic, the grotesque cicisbeo of a horsewoman who, in spite of the account she opened at Lubin's, still stank deliciously of the heavy, cheap makeup and greasy face powder of a traveling actress! So much so that, finally,



debased, ruined (moreover cheated on, for she always cheated on me!), I owed to her pity the miserable condition, the abject role of being (I who bear an illustrious name, I, her husband!) her lover!"

"Sir," I said to him, "this is an appalling story indeed. But no man, however far he has fallen..."

"No, no," he cried, "it is impossible for me to recover my position. For I lied to you earlier. If I wish to kill myself, it is not due to my daughter's tears or my son's reproaches: it is because she grew weary of not being paid, and last night she threw me out, laughing insanely, the adorable woman!"

Originally published as "L'Amant de sa femme," in *Monstres parisiens* (1882).

## THE NEWLYWED

"SIR," SAID THE newly wedded woman, "before you take your place next to me in this bed that the law gives you the right to enter, but from which the sentiments of your enlightened interests must distance you forever, I owe myself the right to address a few words to you about the nature of our imminent intimacy that may perhaps influence your behavior."

"Eh!" said her husband.

And, totally stupefied, waving his arms in the air (those arms he had opened and stretched out for their first embrace), he looked at her open-mouthed.

She gathered her pale blonde hair from the pillow, which was loosened in a great mass covering her shoulders and some of her breast from which her nightdress was slipping:

"If I told you, sir, that I feel something other than perfect revulsion for you, you would have the right to accuse me of hypocrisy. I will avoid that reproach. It is certain that I have always disliked you, and my aversion only grew with the approach of our wedding day. An aversion with a very logical motive! In spite of the good opinion you have of yourself, you cannot be totally unaware of the fact that you have a bald, pointed egg-shaped head, that the back of your head rests on a flabby, pale roll of skin, that your little yellow bloodshot eyes weep with a resinous substance, that a sort of beard bristles inside your nostrils, that your gray lips (the mere sight of which permanently rules out any possibility of a kiss) resemble the nearly absent lips of the mummies



in Saint Michel's tomb at Bordeaux. While I, at twenty, am filled with the beating of a noble heart! And the magnificent, plump apple of my youth dreamed, sir, of some other press."

"Oh!" said her husband, who had collapsed into an armchair, dumb-founded and bemused.

She continued, revealing a little more of her breast, smiling, her voice soft and slow:

"As for your moral qualities, I am grieved to admit that their existence has not, in any way whatsoever, been made plain to me. I believe that there is one excellent way not to be heard, and that is to speak to your conscience! Obviously, you have only a very vague idea of those sublime unsophistications: virtue, love, devotion, heroism. Once, from my window, I saw you giving a one-franc coin to a beggar woman and then waiting patiently in the rain for her to give you eighteen sous' change! Sir, you are my husband, but you are a coward. You are also an imbecile! Of course, one cannot expect everybody to be intelligent or fully to understand the intelligence of others. If you said to Tartempion: 'Be Shakespeare!' he would rebel and with good reason, and Jocrisse would refuse to mingle his spirit with that of Lope de Vega without fear of ridicule. But there are degrees of stupidity and incomprehension! You have descended to the lowest degrees: one Sunday (we were already engaged) at Padeloup's, near my house, you listened to the prelude to Lohengrin with such a naive and complete look of stupefaction, impossible to imitate, that tears of disdainful pity came into my eyes!"

He rebelled.

"Since I am so ugly, vile, and stupid," he cried, "why on earth did you marry me?"

"Because, sir," she replied, "you are rich."

She drew aside the Mechlin lace that futilely tickled the pink tip of her left breast, and continued her speech:

"Yes, because you are rich. Money, sir, is good. You have money, I praise you for having it. Through what usury, through what infamies, through what convicted son, through what grandmother reduced to eating bread soup, did you accumulate, increase, and increase even more your remarkable piles of bank notes and minted metal? I do not even care to ask you. I accept and appreciate the result, without worrying about the means. Money does not smell of the mire whence it came; it has the glorious scent of what will be. It contains the potential for all



chimeral! It is the divine realizer! Orpheus, Saint Anthony, the Seraphic Doctors, all the frenzied worshipers of the ideal must beware not to despise that omnipotent transformer: money, the illuminator of diamonds, the revealer of women's beauty. Without it, nothing exists, nothing is itself. I, poor, beautiful girl that I am, needed some for the superb fabrics and exotic furniture and Venetian mirrors through which beauty is doubled, and for the horses pawing at the doorstep on the gravel of the grounds. I had two ways in which to obtain it: prostitution or marriage. I chose marriage because it does not affect one's status. I could have been a strumpet, but I prefer to make you a cuckold."

"Madame!" roared her husband.

"I perceive that these notions, new to you, seem rather strange. You will get used to them gradually. However, sir, do me the favor of opening the curtains and telling me whether there is anyone walking past the door, looking up at the light from our window?"

Dazed with surprise and rage, the man did not move.

"Well?" she said.

He lifted the curtain.

"Yes, there is someone indeed, a man!"

"A very young man, sir, as handsome as you are ugly, as noble as you are vile, as intelligent as you are stupid, as poor as you are rich. It is he who shall be my lover this very evening, if you do not mind. I planned this honeymoon night. I am just waiting for you to give him the sign."

This was just too impudent! The ridiculed husband rushed at her. He would beat her, bite her, strangle her. "Ah, sir! If you kill me," she said, "my cries will be so very implausible!" With execrable sangfroid, he lowered his head, drew back, and contemplated her at length with a foolish, wide-eyed stare.

She concluded:

"I shall come to the point. I married you because you are rich, but I would not like to be your wife, because you are physically and morally hideous. On the contrary, a passionate desire attracts me to the young man walking beneath our window. The situation is clear: you are hated; he is adored. Oh, I know that you are my master, for you have acquired me! At this very moment you could get into the bed in which I lie and from which I spurn you. I will not defend myself! I submit. Now the bargain has been struck, you are free to take possession. But consider, Sir, that you will probably have nothing to be pleased about concerning the final clause. Ignoring the fact that I shall be careful not to hide my disgust, are you one of those men who goes into raptures about the



beauty of virgins, their golden hair and their snowy white breasts? Men of your age should be concerned with other matters. Sir, this embrace would be a chore for me — and for you. Spare us that. And the day after would be terrible. Yes, terrible. I swear to you that, if you sleep, be it only for an hour, in this bed, I will leave tomorrow and throw my arms around the neck of the first man I meet. In the antechamber, on the stairs! If you make me your wife, beware, I will be everyone's mistress! And I shall do so with a resolute fury, without disguise, flaunting it, proclaiming it. Dismiss those of your valets who do not have grey hair. Indeed, you will be mocked, jeered, vilified, pointed at. Ah, I guarantee it! But if, discreetly (what a small sacrifice, which may well cause so much less worry), you open the window a little and clap three times, then quietly retire into a distant room, leaving the door ajar for the man I have chosen to enter... Oh! then that changes everything! The offense to your honor will be negligible, since it will remain forever secret. You will indeed be cuckolded, but in a way that will not wound your pride! And you yourself can believe that there is nothing going on. Think about it, sir. Do you want me to have one secret love or twenty recognized ones? As a good friend, I advise you to take the first option. Anyway, it will assure you of my gratitude and even, tomorrow morning, dining with the family, as I look at you I could shiver slightly, as if involuntarily, and blush naively, which would do you a great honor."

That was about all of the newly wedded woman's speech. What did her husband do? Did he strangle the impudent woman, as he had momentarily and praiseworthily intended to do, or did he die of a stroke due to the excessively violent emotions of surprise and anger? I do not know. This tale does not have a conclusion. However, Valentine affirms that, while he was passing beneath the newlyweds' window that night, he heard, in the street, the sound of three slow, discreet claps.

Originally published as "La Nouvelle mariée," in *Monstres parisiens* (1882).



# **The Ritual of Love**

by **Joséphin Péladan**

---

Translated by **Rachel Ashton**

**Introduction**

by **Jennifer Birkett**



# Masochistic Inscriptions: Politics, Fetishism, and Form in the work of Joséphin Péladan (1859–1916)

by Jennifer Birkett

All cultural moments have their bit players, who stand briefly in the spotlight of contemporary fashion and then fall back into the shadows, abbreviated, at best, into half sentences in the more comprehensive literary histories. Decadence, with its excess of conflicting and inchoate energies, proliferated such minor figures; in one sense, greatness is by definition not even on the agenda of its ambitions. In this first manifestation of the mass market and media hype, fame, or notoriety, is the measure of individual achievement, and the reverberations of fame are notoriously short-lived. Joséphin Péladan, in his time one of the noisiest and most colorful products of a culture that prized performance and show, has also been until recently one of the most thoroughly forgotten.

Péladan was his own best self-presenter. Robert Baldick has described him effectively as “a notorious charlatan who claimed to be descended from the Chaldean Mages — conveniently forgetting his humble Parisian debut as a bank clerk in the *Crédit Français* — and who used to perambulate the boulevards in a silver waistcoat and flowing black burnous, his hands folded upon his breast.”<sup>1</sup> The same boulevards were plastered with the posters of Péladan’s *Salon de la Rose & Croix* and even, on occasion, filled with its processions. Most of his contemporaries found him ridiculous. J.-K. Huysmans referred to him in *Là-bas* as “that cheapjack magician, that mountebank from the Midi”<sup>2</sup> — although later, in the issue of *Gil Blas* for January 9, 1893, he included Péladan among the manipulators of astral forces on whom he blamed the death of his friend Father Boullan. If Péladan’s expertise in black magic was somewhat dubious, his popularity with journal editors made him a force to be reckoned with. He had too his share of respectable admirers. Strindberg, who shared his views on women, thought him “the greatest, a man of beauty, who heralded *l’époque spirituelle* before Maeterlinck” (letter of January 30, 1901). He admired Péladan’s symbolist plays (many of which, despite their author’s best efforts,



remained unstaged), describing them in a letter of February 14, 1901, as "food for a lion." In another letter, from July 1898, he compared his novels favorably with those of Zola.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the reasons for Péladan's fall into obscurity are easily established. The very immediacy of the issues he raised, which in the 1880s and 1890s responded to the passionate concerns of a certain section of the public (the right-wing religious and monarchist factions), swiftly made them matters of mostly archaeological interest. His "philosophy," an unlikely amalgam of Rosicrucian, Cabalist, and Catholic doctrines, is too outrageous to have merited serious academic study by conventional philosophers or theologians, although its significance is now beginning to be recognized by cultural and social historians. His writing was not stylish enough to hold the interest of the scholarly aesthetes who kept in print the discreet erotica of a Pierre Louÿs or salacious enough to attract the following of Catulle Mendès. Péladan no longer fits publishing fashion, even at the most basic level. His fictions are epic conceptions (the novel cycle *La Décadence Latine* [1884-1900] is an attempt at a rewriting of his whole historical moment), while most anthologizers of decadence prefer, for obvious reasons, to define decadence as the period of the short story. But although understandable, the lack of present-day study of his work is also unfortunate. Readers of the extract in this volume who want to know more, and who turn to the reprints of his fiction now available, will quickly see why.<sup>4</sup> Péladan's work is politically, as well as stylistically, embarrassing. Touching on all the themes, issues, and images that preoccupy his contemporaries, he brings to their formulation an emphasis and an excitement that reveals too much. Interests and attitudes that other writers conceal by irony, innuendo, and other discretions of style stand out in all their crudity in Péladan's careless self-exposure. His work has a symptomatic importance for the understanding of the conservative neuroses of his time, and its strands lead into major areas of contemporary and continuing controversy: religious politics, the politics of nationalism, and, most of all, the politics of gender and class.

Péladan's writing is driven by contradictory impulses, resolved in deadlock. On the one hand, he writes to transform modern reality in the light of ideological conviction and personal fantasy. On the other, he writes to denounce the recalcitrance of the modern world to his Ideal. Between the two moves, acknowledgment of the limits of art becomes art itself and, more than that, art's whole pleasure. His work indicates the extent to which masochism (far more than sadism,



although less often acknowledged) is the underlying drive of politics and psychology in fin-de-siècle France. Gilles Deleuze's 1971 *Sacher-Masoch: An Interpretation* is still worth reading for its account of the vogue for Sacher-Masoch in France in the last half of the 1880s and for its analysis of what constitutes the masochistic mode. Deleuze identifies as key features the aestheticization of pain, fetishistic displacement and the ritualization of desire, and a distinctive threefold symbolization of women (the warmly sensual Aphrodite, the sadistic Oedipal Mother, mediator of patriarchal Law, and the Oral Mother, the masochist's preferred type, who simultaneously enfolds the victim and releases him into Death). These features of Sacher-Masoch's writing recur throughout decadent prose and are particularly marked in Péladan's work. Most important, in Péladan, as in Sacher-Masoch, these features appear explicitly linked to a particular set of political choices. Born in Galicia, actively involved in the pan-Slavic movement, Sacher-Masoch wrote of struggling nationalisms and beleaguered authority as well as individual impotence. His best-selling historical novels spoke directly to a France still smarting at her defeat by Prussia in 1870–71, and to an establishment and its supporters acutely conscious of the multiple humiliations and threats represented by the resistance of the Commune. In these novels, Deleuze indicates, "history, politics, mysticism, eroticism, nationalism and perversion are closely intermingled, forming a nebula around the scenes of flagellation."<sup>5</sup> The same nebula reappears around the scenes of humiliation at the core of Péladan's epic, which charts the painful frustration of attempts, finally abandoned, to reinstate the Law of the Father: the twin failure to recuperate the heroic male self-image and to reinstate traditionalist and monarchist order in France.

Péladan's epic records the struggles of Body against Spirit and of Materialism against the Ideal. Behind the capitalized abstractions lies the reality of the political struggle that Péladan casts as one between Aristocracy (to which he, as Artist, sees himself linked) and the Mob. More accurately formulated, this is a conflict between more or less representative forms of democracy, behind which lies another opposition between two different economic options, capitalism and nascent socialism. Accurate historical analysis is not however Péladan's style. He identifies the massed populace as the single source of disruption: "[The masses] like the scent of spilt blood, they like wars, brothels, and universal suffrage, those three foul products of mankind" (*L'Initiation sentimentale* [1887], p. 18). Borrowing the language of aristocratic elitism, the founding notice of his Société de la Rose & Croix esthétique-



que (1891) identifies the aesthetic and political crusades: "Latin civilization in its declining days must hand over to its successors a book, a temple, and a sword. There must be an inventory of the treasures bequeathed by the past and of our modern conquests; above all, there must be action in a mode capable of civilizing the Barbarians who come after us" (*La Gynandre* [1891], p. 349). Taking up the position of the petty bourgeois of his period, the former bank clerk knows where his best interests lie. Collusion with the Law of the Father is perceived as a better risk than alliance with the brother clan.

Whether the discourse is that of art, religion, or sexuality, the positions Péladan takes are linked directly to his resistance to democratic politics. In his art criticism, partisan commitment rules out any interest in Impressionist experiments. He is not interested in art for its own sake, only in the message it can carry. His volume of collected criticism, *L'Art ochlocratique, Salons de 1882 et de 1883* (1888), is dedicated to the service of the Ideal, Tradition, and Hierarchy. These preoccupations are reiterated in the statutes of the Salons de la Rose & Croix catholique (1891), in the strict conditions laid down for would-be participants (women are explicitly excluded), and in the prescription of appropriate subjects. Priority is given to representations of myth, mysticism, and religious dogma and to studies of the "idealized nude," after Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. His preferred artists are Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, and Félicien Rops (who engraved a number of the frontispieces for his novel cycle), in whom he identified a "Catholic" dimension, centered in their representations of woman and carnal pleasure. At issue for Péladan is the potency of the visual image: art's ability to construct images for viewing that can mobilize, concentrate, and redirect instinctive responses. He brings out into the open the recognition underlying all decadent art; that is, the political function of the fascinated gaze. Rops especially, with his studies of streetwalkers and his satirical exposures of the whore beneath the mask of the bourgeois matron, is said to offer feminine icons that symbolize the degeneracy and disorder of modern France, where all "natural" hierarchies are reversed. Rops draws the knowing ("androgynous") temptress who actively employs her sexuality not to serve men but to establish power over them.

It is instructive to compare Rops's frontispiece for the first volume of Péladan's novel cycle on Latin decadence, *Le Vice suprême* (1884), with Péladan's text. In both, there is the same identification of moral and political prejudices. Rops draws a headless (Republican) bourgeois in his black frock coat, displaying a skeleton-whore, fresh from her



coffin, in party dress. The two together preside over a crumbling landscape, simultaneously Paris-Montmartre and Rome, under a sky filled with wheeling carrion. They stand on a pedestal engraved with a skeletal Roman she-wolf, unable to feed her starving pups. Péladan's version of this scapegoating of the feminine for the collapse of the French (and Catholic) empire is the androgyne pleasure-loving whore who refuses to devote her seductive powers to the exclusive service of the Catholic cause. Against her, the novel sketches alternative icons of a passive feminine sensuality that submits itself to patriarchal order. The princess Léonora d'Este, a mystical beauty drawn in the mode of the Italian primitives, is a woman who recognizes both the transgressive power of sexuality and the force of the Christian moral code that requires its (and her) submission.

The same structures emerge in Péladan's assimilation of the resources of music to his antidemocratic mission. His interest here is chiefly in Wagner, who is representative, he admits, of the enemy who subjugated France but whose work carries an ideological charge with which he strongly sympathizes. In *La Victoire du mari* (1889), the bizarre magical adventure that constitutes the sixth volume of *La Décadence Latine*, the incantations of Wagnerian opera and the fascination of the myths it deploys cradle the mystical odyssey of husband and wife, who discover and transcend their sexuality in response to the incitements of the music. In the end, the energy of sexuality is caught within the secure frame of Catholic order, not denied but circumscribed by guilt, punishment, and suffering. For Péladan, art, music, and writing are all functional, and their function is to legitimize desire, within limits. Art serves to confront that which is outside order, to give form to the obscene. In the process, it opens it to transformations that can make it not only safe for public consumption but a powerful vehicle through which to address the public imagination.

In religious persuasion, Péladan is an adherent of the ultramontane and traditionalist variant of Catholicism that was revived in France after the defeat by Prussia and constituted part of a political bid to roll back the gains of Republican democracy. The period of revived monarchist influence in the French Assembly was brief (1871-77), but the after-effects of the legitimacy it restored to conservative political formulations lingered on. Unlike that of many decadent and symbolist contemporaries (Remy de Gourmont, for example), Péladan's interest in Catholicism was never purely aesthetic. He inherited a family commitment to the traditionalist cause. His father, Adrien Péladan, had been an important disseminator of traditionalist and ultramontanist Cath-



olicism in the 1840s and 1850s, and his apocalyptic pamphlets, published with papal approval, were again significant for the 1870s and 1880s, newly obsessed by prophetic promises of national renewal and miraculous interventions by the Virgin in the interests of suffering France. Joséphin combined his father's Catholic crusade with his own version of Masonic mysticism. In May 1888, he founded the Ordre de la Rose & Croix with fellow occultists Stanislas de Guaita, Papus (Gérard Encausse), and Paul Adam. Strindberg enthused that "the Sâr Péladan is the reforming Catholic occultist, and his book, *Comment on devient Mage*, is the greatest and most beautiful reading there is for a Catholic." Péladan quickly split with his colleagues when the pope began to issue his encyclicals against freemasonry and occultism, but he did not evacuate either theme from his fiction. He returned to them explicitly in the mid-1890s when a new pope "betrayed" Catholicism by seeking openings toward the Republic and democracy.

It is, however, sexuality and the politics of gender that provide Péladan with the substance of most of his writing and enable him to represent most effectively his own sense of the precariousness of his place in contemporary relations of power. Péladan represents the foundation of social order as the heterosexual couple: Man and Woman are separately imperfect, but together they have the potential ability to construct the human ideal, which is the Androgyne. A coherent body of doctrine on this process emerges from his three treatises: *Comment on devient Mage* (1892), *Comment on devient Fée* (1893), and *La Science de l'amour* (1911). In the divine economy, Man, the thinker, aspires to the status of the Magus, who in his ascent to perfection has conquered carnal desire and is in complete possession and control of his intellectual and spiritual faculties. Woman, not intellectual but passionate, should ideally aspire to the status of handmaiden to the Magus, adoring and supporting. Heterosexuality is the field of an epic struggle between the two, in which the female function is to heat the male body and imagination and stimulate his creative energies. Having helped Man materialize his desire, she now faces the challenge of satisfying him carnally without disappointing or entrapping him. In this version of sexual intercourse, the male draws off raw female energy and puts it to uses that a woman never could. Merodack explained to the princess Léonora d'Este: "I have penetrated the riddle, and the Woman-sphinx has licked my feet; but the spectacle of Woman dominating Man has always angered me; it is a thing against Nature. Whether she's a pitiful slave or a despicable tyrant, Woman is moved by trifles and thinks about nothing; she is equally unthinking in the Sublime or down in



the mud, eternally resistant to the Idea; and it is the Idea that moves worlds" (*Le Vice suprême*, p. 244). Péladan's novel cycle offers three stereotypes of female activity: the true androgyne, who acts as Sister and Friend and who will admire a man without demanding sexual performance, the Mother-mistress, the enemy of man, and, best but rare, the Wife-mistress, who supports and "consoles." *La Décadence Latine*, charting various defeats of would-be heroes by recalcitrant feminine matter, moves reluctantly but relentlessly to the final admission that woman is incapable of producing the androgyne ideal. The heroic male is left with no option but chastity: the total renunciation of desire. The last volume of the cycle, *La Vertu suprême* (1900), written in the aftermath of Zola's great pamphlet blast against the Right (*J'accuse!* . . . , 1898), constructs the Magus as an icon of the powerlessness of the hero. All the rhetorical stops are pulled — dying Crusader, suffering Prophet, crucified Christ, Wandering Jew — but there is no disguising the admission of defeat and the desire to signal the end of the great era of patriarchal authority. By way of compensation, this last volume is strewn with the bodies of dead and dying women, scapegoated for the phallic failure: either too submissive, say the heroes, or not submissive enough.

The extract selected for the present anthology is taken from *A Coeur perdu* (1888), the third volume of Péladan's fourteen-volume epic. Nebo, the young sculptor-genius, is set against Paule, a Russian princess. Nebo is trying to turn Paule into his equal and to initiate her into the path of the Magus. The first step is to teach her to know and resist desire. They have toured the Parisian brothels together, with Paule in transvestite costume, and she has passed the first tests. The problem now for Nebo is to bring this knowing subject to heel. If he lets her dominate him, he will be destroyed. If he succeeds, he will have created the androgyne ideal. His is not, the text emphasizes, a selfish personal desire. If Nebo succeeds, he will have in Paule a powerfully erotic icon of the total emptiness of material satisfactions and the beauty of the desire for the Ideal. He could have sculpted this for the masses, they would have fallen at the feet of his image, and she would have led them to the new theocratic state. Paule has already begun to understand this, seeing how men cluster around her, fascinated by her frigid beauty. "Happiness," she muses, "comes from reducing our vegetative existence and quenching the life of the passions, and developing with all our might the intellectual life, that of the angels; which all adds up to the Androgyne, which is what I represented for them" (*L'Initiation sentimentale*, p. 147). The climactic confrontation in Nebo's experiment ends in failure. That failure is, however, doubly excused. On the one



hand, it was the product of a magnificent dream; on the other, it was Paule's fault.

In these dream-texts, Nebo, Merodack, and even Paule carry elements of Péladan's own contradictory fantasies of self. Nebo is the young impetuous genius, who still has a chance of success; Merodack, the insurance policy, the worldly wise sage, who knows the struggle is hopeless; Paule, the forbidden carnality in himself he both fears and desires. The style of representation is chosen to display and resolve the contradictions, making an image of pleasure out of what is in fact humiliation and pain.

Fetishism is the driving force of Nebo's drama. Phallic anxiety is simultaneously displayed and disputed in the decor of his temple: walls and ceilings are painted over with lingams, the tall throne on a plinth covered with stiff gold brocade is flanked by a smoking tripod. At the back of the room, a high red curtain flanked by tall lilies is Nebo's point of entrance, echoed by his long crimson robe, which finally splits to disclose his "crimson nakedness." The attributes and dress he prescribes for Paule perform the same function: the attributed authority of the "royal wand" she is to hold, the tall lotus, but most of all the "dazzling armor" of the jewel-studded gauzes (borrowed from Baudelaire and Gustave Moreau) that spell out the triumph of dress over body, art over nature. The threatening soft, dark warmth of the body gives way to the stiff hardness of the gemstones, with their dazzling, clear flashes of light. This is not, however, a simple version of classic fetishism, in which the subject declines to abandon the protective form that shields him from confronting the female genitalia and the threat of castration with which he invests them. The declared aim is to achieve, not evade, sexual congress. In a calculated intermediary stage, the artist moves to replace the borrowed symbol of authority that is the jewel-screen with that of his own words. Declarations of phallic potency and authority are brought increasingly close to home, and finally the text declares an act of consummation, although not the one that was planned. At the last moment, the impatient Paule seizes the hero and rapes him. The text attempts to enact a final stylistic recuperation, but in the end this remains a fetishistic performance. The final, irreducible fetish in Péladan's project is that of language. If art is to replace experience, then the price is the real thrill of the unknown. ("Is it that we are fooled by traditional categorizations, and influenced by the suggestion of our predecessors to determine whether sensations are pleasant or painful . . . ?"). The finest art, Nebo's theater or Péladan's writing, can only play author.



The strength of the performance depends on ritual elaboration. Ritual demands the generation of a set of frames around the core experience of impotence, which simultaneously intensify and displace its significance. Reinterpreted in their light, the experience of humiliation and limits becomes a source of intense pleasure. There is a slow initiation into the subject, with lengthy philosophical and then religious disquisitions on the interpretation of the sexual act, which serve both to redefine it and to build excitement. Later, another philosophical digression on the power of symbols is again a mechanism to build suspense through delay, as is the High Priest Nebo's cumulative sequence of lyrical incantations on jewels, perfumes, and the names of the Goddess and his precious blazon of Paule's body. An enforced seven days' delay precedes the mystery. Paule's entrance into the ante-chamber is drawn in slow motion; she slowly puts on a special hieratic costume, described in lengthy and elaborate detail. At each stage, the crossing of thresholds, figuring the entry into new worlds, is carefully marked.

The emphasis throughout is on the central presence of the artist-priest modeling a world through form. The points of reference of this world are artistic ones (Moreau, Wagner, Shakespeare). Style is foregrounded by the confusion of styles, modes, and forms: drama, tableau, bas-relief, portrait, philosophical disquisition, lyric, blazon. Vocabulary is worked on to generate a range of rare and exotic, pseudolearned, and technical words, as well as the self-consciously simple. Contorted and broken syntax signals the efforts of the writer to capture in the limits of language a vital intensity of experience that requires super-human powers of expression. And there, really, is Péladan's problem, because neither the experience nor the expressive gifts are his in more than fantasy. His heroes cannot keep it up, and no more can he. High-blown rhetoric drops suddenly into bathetic everyday expression, plain indignation, and heavily ironic denunciation of a world that refuses to play his game.

---

#### NOTES

1. Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 129.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 66 and 209.
3. Letters cited in Orjan Lindberger, "Some notes on Strindberg and Péladan," in



Marilyn Johns Blackwell (ed.), *Structures of Influence: A Comparative Approach to August Strindberg*. I am grateful to Prof. Mike Robinson for drawing this article to my attention.

4. The novel cycle *La Décadence Latine* was reprinted by Slatkine Reprints, Geneva, 1979. Page references in the present text are to this edition.

5. Gilles Deleuze, *Sacher-Masoch: An Interpretation*, trans. J. McNeil (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 10. Deleuze's essay is reprinted as "Coldness and Cruelty," in *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1989).



## CONTENTS

CHAPTER I	Sentimental Hieraticism .....	853
II	The Sensations of an Idol .....	858
III	The Canticle of Perfumes .....	865
IV	Devotions .....	867
V	Gemmery .....	869
VI	Consecration .....	871
VII	Metamorphosis .....	872
VIII	Sacrifice .....	874



### BOOK THREE

## THE RITUAL OF LOVE

*The Hebrew prophets predicted his misfortune; for he had built a temple in the high places in which he celebrated his love for the stranger with sacred perfumes, solemn words, and all the rites reserved for the cult of Adonai.*

*The Lyric Proses (unpublished).*

— J.P.

### CHAPTER I

#### Sentimental Hieraticism

A lover in spite of himself, Nebo wished at least to stamp love with the seal of his intellect, blazon it with his colors, strike the initial coin with his arms and with the effigy of his pride.

A Platonist condemned to an orgy of the flesh, a metaphysician devoted to paroxysms, he sought the most grandiose pomp for these celebrations of the Beast, at which he was to officiate.

He could not resign himself to possessing the beloved woman just as all the world possesses her; to saying, "if I have successors, they will give her the same impressions, if not the same sensations"; to being banal and just like any other in the sphere of bestiality that was already so banal. He prepared his sexual entry just as an Italian podesta prepares his entry into a town that has surrendered. He prepared the setting, adjusted the details of the scene with care, and could hardly breathe until he had proved to himself that he was committing a debauchery worthy of a Mardouck-Baladan or a Toutmes. This great artist plotted his love like an extravaganza; since he only lived to defy nature and defeat reality, he conceived a dream setting and an artistic composition for his work of the flesh.

The thought of contriving his passion in an aesthetic mode, and of making love in this skeptical Paris, dressed in black, just as men did in the age of imperial purple, nearly consoled him for the feminization of his fancy.



In extreme civilizations there are certain people so subtle that they die without ever being understood; they are loved, being mysterious; but they fatigue even the most tireless of hearts, for their cup is never filled, whatever beauty one pours into it; looking down into their souls one cannot make out the depths; envy terms them egoists in spite of their devotion; unlucky love says that they are cold in spite of their passionate souls. The more ingenuous spleens express it better, in inferior terms: "We are never their pleasure, we are only a pretext; their real pleasure is always with that which is given to them, which they take as a well-brought-up man takes his boredom, swearing that they are enjoying themselves. They do not want to live life; and your naked body and your bleeding heart are merely springboards for their leap toward the stars; and then they fall back on top of you, crushing and doleful."

When they labor, they astound; if sterile, they are labeled mad, unless there is that hypocritical mediocrity, that self-effacement without detachment that had earned Nebo the indifference of a society — those Freemasons of the lodge of fashionable tastes — all of whose goodness lay in that negative of not meaning any harm.

If the princess had read in the soul of her Beloved that love alone, even in its novelty, was not enough for him, and that he would resign himself better to this fact by reincarnating in himself some ancestral Oriental King, she would have despaired, and would perhaps have understood that androgynes who are sexually indeterminate are only good as brothers. The only fidelity possible for the being engrossed in his own thoughts like a treasure-guarding snake, or as volatile as a fragrance attempting to intoxicate itself with a scent — Is it not spiritual fidelity?

One never morally abandons the woman who, by dint of listening to you, has identified with you and become your living work of art, and who comes to lament her defilement and tell of her lovers, as you tell her of your vile deeds and your mistresses. This pact of consoling indulgence, this filiality of woman before a spiritual father just as faltering and sinful as she is a sinner, seems abominable: it is, however, one of the new forms that Christian charity has caused to germinate in souls that are too barren for purer foliage; such is the vileness of a life of passion that, in the midst of scenes of profanity, its sacred tableau is of those two people who love each other enough beyond love to seek each other only in tears and to soothe their sorrows instead of their lust.

This confession without repentance or penitence, and this moral counseling that at times accords with the ideal but never with virtue, can only take place between two people who have not possessed one another, for the antecedence of a bond of flesh would corrupt the



mingling of their tears: they must both be wounded and defeated by life, and not by wounds they have themselves inflicted or by a struggle consummated between them. Thus Merodack imagined the realization of sisterhood, as the final kiss of two souls in their decline, a very sweet, very deep kiss of reassurance, yet without passion; a discerning kiss given with the awareness of all that its passionate and bitter predecessors have cost. Perhaps Nebo might have accepted this lesser mode, the only way of realizing his Chimera; but meeting her, virginal, young, and admirable, the one he desired, his chosen one, his youth and the virginity that comes of indifference, when the flesh is severed from vulgar delights, must have pushed him fatally toward Paule; it pushed him so well that his only hesitation was over what noble and grandiose manner he would choose to fall into those pure and heavenly white arms.

Forced to open up before her the map of Love, and to experience the sentimentalities he had demonstrated in their most puerile and atrocious aspect, he had to elevate, with great effort, contemplation to pure ecstasy and, catlike, transform kisses into bites.

Veiling with the nebulous phrases of his adoration, the caustic analyses of *sentimental initiation*, and in the foam of a kiss, drowning all memory of his doctrines, Chiron's tale that he hoped to turn into an Achillean epic; this patient and dangerous manual of the evil of passion not only had been one of wasted horror and futile nausea; but even today, when the mad hand of the princess with one gesture tore to pieces the whole seraphic mirage, formulating the summons of the flesh, he considered his masterpiece of disgust, the great horror, and wished to turn it into something splendid: through the power of his will, this coupling would become a celestial vision. A proud wish, even stronger than this artistic dream, had him in its grasp — the wish to elevate in himself all that he had despised and disparaged in humanity.

"How do you treat your husband then?"

"Every evening as we are retiring I call him 'My king'; and every morning as we are rising, 'My emperor.'"

So, Nebo wanted to go to bed an emperor and wake up as God!

The magnificence of an Asiatic despot was beneath his ambition; he wanted to give himself, and even more give her, the illusion of a coupling of pagan gods in the clouds of Empyrea.

Excessive in all his ways, just as he had wanted the heart without the body, likewise he now devised physical and spiritual means for the greatest intoxication possible.

Catholic practices and upbringing impose their miraculous seal on



all the expressions of existence, and it seems that a little religiosity is present even in the most corrupt practices.

That perfect absurdity that remorse and eternal damnation are the very spice of the sins of a believer has been spread by people who lack both faith and Christian culture. Since the *Présidente de la Tourvel* became the prototype of the guilty devotee, people have believed and written psychological studies just as Catholically false as Shelley's *Cenci* father. There is only remorse when passion does not burn or when it dies; is it really in fact remorse, that sentiment made up of fear and art which plays at penitence; or is it repentance for a beautiful sin, that is to say, a mortal act where pride blooms without alarming prudence? What we take to be awareness of its unlawfulness in the eyes of the Church is only ever a fear of disappointment or of consequences: and virtues that are not fervent fade into cowardliness and impotence. To weep over one's transgressions means to weep over one's acknowledged moral ugliness and as long as the heart believes itself to be on the path of beauty it does not care in the least about the sin it skirts. Paule had declared it: his love seemed to him to be duty itself. Nebo, offhand and sophistic in the face of Merodack's representations, could not perceive his misdeed, so splendid it seemed to him. He fortified himself against aesthetic remorse, the only kind he was capable of. His urge to make illusions in the bedchamber would present material possession on an imaginary stage together with the positivity of complete contact. The Beast rose up, invincible; being unable to chase it away, he garlanded it, gilded it, and embellished it in all conceivable ways.

For a moment he had thought about what Sue had specified somewhere; the courage of abstention was not for him; but he did not believe he had the strength to turn away from so much aroused beauty, despite the illusions he stubbornly nursed of remaining moderate and self-controlled, when the princess freely deployed all the power of a statue burning with passionate life.

For a week there was a coming and going of decorators and florists at the little apartment in Rue Galvani; on Thursday and Friday nights there were lights and noise until dawn.

Paule, consumed with expectation, did not dare come before the agreed day; she did not have that feeling of dominance that makes a woman disobedient, thinking: "I have him."

She did not have him, in fact, however improbable that appeared even to her: yet a boundless confidence in the power of possession assured her of triumph the moment the sexuality bestowed by Nebo gave free rein to her admirable female energies.



This singular postponement of seven days was pregnant with mystery: why seven, not six? She put this number down to a design of fate.

How was he spending these seven days? a question that made her more curious than she had ever been. It was a torpid and exhausting seven days; the apprehension of happiness becomes painful; reflecting on sensual pleasure makes you imagine it to be something immense and also to fear disappointment. Nebo had denied himself so much, exorcising the flesh, that the unfortunate child, oscillating between joy and fear of the unknown, now exulting in intoxicating reveries, now convulsed with indefinable terrors, feared a disappointment for her or for him, perhaps for both.

Preoccupied with ceremonializing debauchery, the Platonist, obeying his craving for art and the proud notion that he could never be likened to another lover, was also satisfying the state of his lover's soul. So long and so passionately had the imagination of the virgin been logically calculating the  $x$  of total sensation, in order to forestall the "that is all!" which would shatter both the terms of passion and sisterhood, he owed her feverish and exasperated expectation to provide an extraordinary sensation that she could never relive; one that was so unexpected, so captivating, that it would seem unbelievable, even while she was experiencing it.

To attempt this marvelous adventure of enveloping the materialization of love in the Ideal, and of enveloping it externally for all the senses, without mysteriously paralyzing them; to leave an individual all his cerebral liberty and yet dislodge him from his own time, a prodigious certainty of accomplishment would be necessary. For failure is a boundless ridicule that kills even the most vivid of passions for the lover who dares to say "I am taking you up into the clouds, to the land of Shakespeare and *A Thousand and One Nights*, on the Venusberg, there is a temple built for your invocation; come and preside over the celebration of your mysteries," instead of offering the inanely sensual perspective of the bourgeois, marital bed.

A persistent, biting presentiment whispered that this was his last act of power; henceforth he would be vassal to the accepted mistress. He considered his preparations with melancholy, as those for the enthronement of a queen in the kingdom of his mind and his whole being; as his ancestors, the priests of Chaldea, knew how to save the honor of a Sardanapalian by swallowing up in a great catastrophe a far greater humiliation, he had resolved to vanish from the arms of his beloved if she knotted them too tightly around him! Even though he was himself sure of escaping from the ruin of his love, he admitted to



himself: "what I am doing is my last wish before my abdication."

On the last day, when everything was ready, from his bathtub where he was steeping his flesh in fragrant balms he sent a messenger to deliver the telegram indicating the time at which he expected the princess. A haughty smile furrowed his lips and passed into his eyes: "The Queen of Sheba can come," he murmured, "she will discover the reality of Solomic love. I feel my ancestors returning, invisible witnesses moved by a reception of love in a Magus of Ur in Chaldea."

## CHAPTER II

### The Sensations of an Idol

The day which ended the exile of the princess was a Friday, inaugurating a *Vita Nuova* that she promised herself would be passionate in a different way from that in which Dante breathed the melancholy of his great dark soul, starred with the smile of Beatrice Portinari. After having experienced a poem of contemplation and experienced a poem of kisses, on the day after embraces with biting, foaming mouths, there was a *Vita Nuova*: the extravagant lust of the Oriental cycle in which the omnipotent queen imprisoned herself in her passion, concerned with nothing else, absorbed only in exhausting the caresses of the Beloved.

When she received Nebo's dispatch summoning her that afternoon and not that night, as she expected, she was greatly perplexed about which outfit to choose, and settled on something as simple as possible. A feverish desire propelled her like an arrow toward the Rue Galvani; arriving at the gate, she paused for a moment before ringing, faltering and ashamed of the exact nature of what she had come to seek.

The old servant led her into a room on the ground floor next to the studio; a curtain divided it in two; a large envelope was on a table. Unable to resist, she glanced at it: "For the princess." The blood rushed to her heart; she thought he had departed, leaving this letter of farewell behind him. Trembling so much that she could hardly tear open the envelope, her eyes too frantic to read at first, with great difficulty she made out:

"Behind this curtain is your costume, my idol, adorn your nudity with it; then, press the scarab on the glass and you will be in the temple; a throne awaits you, be seated holding the sacred lotus in one hand and the royal staff in the other, and the worshiper will come and perform his devotions, observe his rites, chant his hymns, and swing the thurible."



At first she understood only two things, that he called her "my idol" and that he was going to come. Immensely relieved, she reread, and for a princess who was so taken up with the latest styles, she was stunned. This thoroughly exceeded the peculiarities to which Nebo had nevertheless already accustomed her: she wondered whether she should take the words "temple" and "throne," which she understood as "bed-chamber" and "bed," literally or figuratively. She settled on the idea that he wanted to draw her in the costume of an idol, before possessing her. "But why," she wondered, "does he say that he will swing the thurible, when he only wants to run a pencil over some bristol board? He might as well have told me this in ordinary terms, can I refuse him anything? If he thought I could, he is a fool; but let me take a look at my costume."

She pulled aside the curtain and was even more astounded: there on a dress stand was placed a dazzling panoply of pearls and gems of unbelievable variety, and that was the entire costume. She blushed at the thought of dressing herself in a mesh of precious stones resting not on cloth, but right against the skin, illuminating her nakedness instead of veiling it. She looked around her for a tunic, even a muslin one, but there was not one scrap of cloth, only a light watercolor in which she saw the manner to wear the jewels alone.

Oh! the strangeness of womankind! She had come to give herself and yet the idea of parading her nudity embarrassed her; her soul had already consented, yet her actions still hesitated at undressing. She put her dress over the mirror, and then her chemise, so that she would not have to see herself. This hieratic outfit was complicated and without the tinted drawing she would have had great difficulty. First, she unbound her magnificent hair and fastened the diadem with a diamond hanging on the end of a gold chain, just above her nose, between her eyebrows. On her ears, she clasped heavy pendants; around her neck, a choker of brilliants from which was suspended an ivory piece with three pendants: from the one in the middle, a string of various pearls fell between her breasts, encircled at their base with a band of gold from which came silver threads supporting two rings for the tips of her breasts.

From the same choker stretched two epaulets of gems with long threads of gold that fell on the fleshy part of her arms, clasped in a circle of silver linked by a small chain to the bracelets on her wrists. Below her bust, a wide belt of gems let a ruby drop onto her navel, and a little lower, a diamond.

From the belt an apron of rustling, pearly threads descended onto



her legs. Two very thin strips of gold followed the line of her groin curving around the base of her stomach. There were bands around her ankles, high-heeled rosewood sandals on her feet, and rings on her toes.

When she had meticulously carried out this investiture, she took the lotus from the vase where it was soaking, and with her ivory staff with a gemmed cross she pulled away her chemise and her dress and uttered a cry of admiration. She appeared so beautiful, so solemnized by the brilliance of all these stones that reflected each other's sparkle, that she became lost in the contemplation of her image.

She did not ask herself whether the gems were false or whether she were playing the fairy in a staged spectacle, nor did she ask herself whether Nebo would appear in a similar costume and whether they would be able to look at each other without laughing and proceed seriously until the end of this masquerade. Paule was in love, and Paule was lyrical; that fear of being taken in even when you are happy, that absurd French need for jokes instead of sexual pleasure, were unknown to her. She thought she looked irresistibly beautiful, for her appearance before her beloved, so she was happy, but she was, above all, serious, for symbols are forces. Covering oneself, surrounding oneself with shapes and colors that correspond to a plan, means that that plan is beginning to be realized. The occultist who dons a star-spangled robe before a magic ceremony has perhaps a mind as sharp as M. de Voltaire only deeper; he knows the relation between idea and form, and the psychic effect that results from this. Paule appeared to herself in heroic form; separated from the world and walking on clouds, she felt herself become an idol — an indescribable psychic state.

She extended Nebo's love to all mankind, he was a god, just as she was a goddess: the rest was mortal! To reach for just one moment, be it brief, this elevation of the self, is, if prosaic minds will forgive this, one of the most beautiful chalices from which a creature can drink a rare and grandiose intoxication.

When she saw herself walk, she blushed slightly; the movement of her body betrayed that human nature that had virtually vanished in the immobility of her hieratic pose.

Moved, anxious even, she touched with a slightly feverish finger the scarab on the mirror, and it turned, opening up a passageway, and, as soon as she had passed through, hasty in her apprehension, the panel slid back into place.

She was in Nebo's studio, but it was so transformed that she did not recognize it.



There was a profusion of brass lamps that would have blinded one with their brightness, were it not for the scented smoke that rose from a tripod filling the room with a haze.

At the back of the room was a great red curtain drawn shut as if guarded by lilies. In the middle was a cubic throne covered in gold brocade, raised up on three steps carpeted with the black bearskins she recognized from their previous embraces. Before the throne were a lighted tripod, a metal table for propitiations that held a casket of perfume, a patera for libations, the harp of neocorus, and a silver chalice.

Lingams were painted on the walls, which were illuminated with Hebraic-Phoenician motifs running curiously over the ceiling and the floor.

She ascended the three fur-covered steps with the bearing of an abbess in a choral ceremony; her right hand held the episcopal staff of ivory, her left hand, the sacred flower.

She looked around: in front of her was a draped figure of Saint John with an eagle's head, as seen in twelfth-century illuminated manuscripts. The smoke was making her eyelids heavy and the sensation she was experiencing interested her more than the details of her scrutiny. Was Nebo using hypnotic suggestion? — a phenomenon villainously produced, ill-defined, and ignorantly isolated from the mathesis by the medical body of Paris, a fact which merely inspires smiles of pity and satisfaction in occultists. Pity, because the occultists alone can explain without stupidity and apply with impunity the energy of magnetism; but, above all satisfaction, for, the day a scientist discovers the true science of the will and of nervous emissions in their relation to the cosmic forces, there will not be enough judges, prisons, or police to contain crime, increased a hundredfold, and the barbarians will come. This is the same punishment that destroyed Babylon and Nineveh, cities that did not have a single vice more than Paris or London, but that satisfied themselves with the omnipotence of the Antichrist.

A symbol has all the power of those who, believing in it, give it its magnetic force: the sign of the cross made by a saint represents, even physically, a force equivalent to thousands of horsepowers. He who makes the sign with all his being becomes the capacitor of all the psychonervous transmissions of which he is the pentacle.

To maintain that the will of Solomon is not dead and that to make his signs is to summon the forces of Solomon in oneself; to affirm that the Word is not only eternal, but is perpetually in a latent state of virtuality and that he whose faith makes it virtual is increased and literally armed with it: such propositions only serve to incite ridicule on



whoever professes them, and rightly so. That which is the oral testament of ancient humanity must not be written down, unless it is obscurely veiled like that of the alchemists or brilliantly as in Greek myth and the music of *The Magic Flute*.

To use the incorrect words of the Faculty, which the public understands, there is suggestion in all things, there is spirituality in all matter, since every fact relating to the soul has its correlative in the understanding. In the highly civilized individual, sensation is always linked to sentiment. Even the uneducated neurasthenic, the shepherd, perceives something beyond perception, that is to say, that beyond the twilight sensation of a lessening of light, he also feels shadows descend into his soul, which is morally colored, like a chameleon, by the tonality of the landscape. Now, in the treatment of mental illness, such as spleen, there could be psychopathic cures, costly but interesting to try, with an impresario for a doctor and the shop at Châtelet as the pharmacy. To wear any costume, being conscious of what it symbolizes, is to take it on morally for a moment. Those very superficial sensualists and profligates who lead the dance of Latin decadence have not seen, among their dancing girls and their pennies, that the disappearance of symbols was a precursor to the ruin of a people; communities only have abstract reasons for existing; the reason for French existence will exist no more, on the approaching day when it changes from being Republican to being American. Symbolically, America is not there and does not exist, except in the person of a few women and a few artists, who are Latins by culture. There is an admirable fact about the psychology of France: she knows no half measures; loathsome or sublime, she forges the thought and the beauty of a world or of a dung heap; her destiny is never to be mediocre. The absence of symbols in our life debases it as much as any government can, and as passion is always determined by appearances, in this respect never was an epoch so lacking. The words "fair lady" still designate something that exists; "noble gentleman" means nothing any longer. Nobody has dared to stage an opera with the costumes we wear, and drama can only produce a pitiful or grotesque young hero who could never recite the tirade of Don Juan: "What! you want us to be joined together?" Since happiness is just a prolonged illusion, one rules out the elements indispensable to pleasure by giving up the means of deluding oneself. By following one of the most mind-destroying formulae, with the worst consequences, "behaving like everyone else," one ends up, excepting the nuances of vulgarity, living just as one travels and just as one is buried, in first or third class. You can forget the provinces, which are just a wilderness of



godless grocers who are busy tying to the stake of public opinion the white and noble winged beings, the albatrosses who are forced to live in this land of exile. Even in Paris, those who have a life of their own are not many in number. Can they not see the ardent curiosity of those of whom Baudelaire sang in his *Damned Women*, commanding the intimacy of exceptional celebrities, in the hope that they do not make love like everybody else?

Climbing the social ladder, the woman who is inclined often remains leaning for a long time without falling, like the Tower of Bologna: she would feel cheated if she did not find more illusion in sin than in duty. At the theater, in novels, every society woman has seen and read how a Diana de Lys finds her way into the artist's studio, and when the curtain falls or the chapter finishes, the imagination feasts on a banal room and a gentleman in shirttails.

Truly, you must have exacting tastes or little pride to empty this vulgar cyathus. If there still exists a woman who is conscious that the mirage of her beauty is a second sun of joy and a cerebral fertility, indeed she must grow melancholy, dreaming of the chivalry of two or three thousand years ago, when kings in love would dedicate a temple and assign priests to their beloved! This great sacrilege of passion, bringing divine honors down to the loved one, this supreme expression of love had been realized by Nebo for the princess Riazan. Without a doubt, in a few hours, the idol would return to the street and would be jostled by passersby, but for her to have been the Absolute, even for a moment, to have scaled that summit of proud pleasure, to have stepped even a little beyond reality and outside time — the sin, even if deadly, was worth the trouble of committing it. The ideality of this idolatry exceeded all the whims and fancies of desire embroidered by the feminine imagination. As a sexual initiation to deflower a virgin, nothing more superior could ever be conceived, and Nebo would be able to say to himself, without flattery: "My debauchery will be the finest ever seen since the age of *les grands siècles*."

For a mind as conscious as his of the Norms, there was an unpardonable flaw in this scenario, and although his ceremony was one of pagan archaism, for someone who had erudite reasons to respect the inner cults of the catacombs, since they were true for their time and since the truth that was in them can still be found in Catholicism, the only religion of the West, he was drinking the wine of his passion from the chalice of the old sanctuaries; like Balthazar, he dared to bring the vessels of the Temple to the table of instinct.

This transfiguration of the flesh, in which male and female no longer



existed, was a masterpiece in amorous aesthetics. But a high priest whose fiery desire was about to animate the idol in the vertiginous splendor of possession, instead of revealing its bestiality, would celebrate it as a mystery.

Suddenly he was there before her and a copper thurible gleamed in a semicircle rising into the thick smoke.

She could not see his face: bare arms, bare neck, wearing the Chaldean tiara, in a scarlet robe, his left hand on his heart, his right swinging the thurible. After each swing, Nebo took a step; near the throne, he bent his knee and laid down the thurible.

Their eyes met now, but neither of them, fatidic and solemn, uttered a word as they watched each other; in the silence, the idol's breasts stirred the glass gems, and that was the only sound.

Nebo, with his left hand, made the sign to harness the dark forces, while the three fingers of his right hand, raised in the air, summoned the daimones of light. For a moment, like this, he seemed to utter what the Church calls a "Secret." Then he approached the tripod; on one knee, he took with his left hand the iron incense box with its compartments containing perfumes, and with the other he seized the ivory spatula and, having invisibly produced a flame, he chanted like an officiant with a clear and deliberately monotonous voice: at each verse he scattered the resins into the blue-flamed bronze.

Sitting on her throne, calm and collected in the pose of a hieratic bas-relief, filled with inexpressible bliss, the princess was in no hurry to see her high priest come, her soul drowning in the idolatry she inspired, not just in Nebo, but in mankind, in the very spheres!

Each time the blazing brass breathed its incense onto her face, she inhaled, together with the pontiff's "I love you," the magnificent illusion that the whole world loved her too. This mirage of pride in which the flesh reveled and the soul rejoiced, uniting the idol and the priest, had surrounded them in their imagination in an Olympian haze. They were in a cloud, and they felt as if they were on top of a cloud. They were experiencing the greatest orgy of self that one could imagine: the princess's self stretched on boundlessly and she no longer remembered her Catholicism, or her modern life. Forgetting all philosophical notions, rising up into divine serenity, intoxicated with her role as smiling Olympian for every second of this incredible hallucination, she felt like a true idol: she was the great Istar, Aphrodite of Chaldea, forced by destiny to dwell in her temple at Ur, until Nebo pronounced his incantation, Nebo, the Mercury who would restore her to celestial life, with his magic more powerful than Fate.



## CHAPTER III

## The Cantic of Perfumes

To thee, goddess of Love, assuager of world-weariness, mother of sweet illusions and nervous wonders, Istar!

To thee, goddess! I offer the myrrh of my heart.

Thine eyes proclaim the glory of the Most High; when he made the sky and the seas, he reflected them both united in thine eye.

Thy vermilion beauty like a beautiful day, Istar, spreads the scent of mullein.

May thou be praised with song, the nable and the ogab, and the ringing of the cymbals!

More devoted than all this noise, Istar, hear my heart beating — beating for thee.

To thee, goddess of kisses, consoler of fallen angels, cradling mother of dreamers with a heavy brow, Istar!

To thee, goddess, I dedicate the cinnamon of my lips, the benzoin of my sighs.

Thy mouth, the threshold of the heavens, smiles like the dawn and glows like the setting sun; the morning freshness and the heat of the afternoon pass over it one by one.

All the flowers of the earth perfume thy breath.

The chorus of mortal beings raise up to thee their nocturnal supplications; they call thee in high places. More tenderly than theirs, my voice entreats you, Istar, answer the prayer of my lips — offered to thee!

To thee, goddess of madness, dispenser of the water of Lethe, mistress of oblivion, who dresses the wounds of our bleeding souls, Istar!

To thee, goddess, I proffer the storax and the sandalwood of my amorous complaint.

Thy white enfolding arms are the staffs where winds and flies the flapping banner of my inflamed loins.

In procession, to ward off daily tedium, bigoted mankind spatters thee with its jolting orgies, and entreats thee with debauchery and insanity.

To him who believes himself wise in loving thee and whose flame of passion rises radiantly skyward to lick the azure of thy skin, open the heavens — open thine arms.



To thee, goddess of frenzy, sister of poets and madmen, kind sister who animates my inert spirits, Istar!

To thee, goddess, I proffer the musk and olibanum of my concupiscence.

Thy lap is the haven where holy voluptuousness cradles the elite for all eternity.

The cry of the sexes proclaims thee, Divinity of bodies in union; sprung from the Absolute in the matrix of thy forms, we shall weep until the day when death returns us to that same threshold. But I cannot wait for that time of deliverance and I will thrust myself forward like a reckless Argonaut on the wing of prayer to conquer thy Golden Fleece.

To thee, goddess of the chimera, thou who incites celestial boldness, sorceress who shows the human animal the hereafter of heroes and the dream of art, Istar!

To thee, goddess, I proffer the amber and the balsam that my word distils.

Sovereign of appearances, mistress of false horizons, of consoling views, displayer of fictive paradises: it is thou who dispenses seductive plans, noble ambitions; patroness of the Argonauts, mother of Prometheus and muse of the Bards, the universe revolves around your whim.

To thee, goddess of goodness, sweet femininity, tamer of savage mortals, artisan of kind charity, Istar! To thee, goddess, I proffer the incense of my homage.

The shape of thy breast soothes our pain, our nights are lit up by thine eyes and thy smile is the blessing of fond souls. The brothers of Orpheus are thy missionaries carrying the kiss and the lyre into the midst of the clash of instincts.

The little good there is in the world, the little beauty there is on earth, is only a glimmer, only the reflection of thy beauty. Ecstatic sacrilegious Pontiff, what matter, I shall dare, Goddess; thou art a woman, and, if thou dost not answer my prayer, thou wilt forgive.

Istar! Istar! I have fought thy battles and hailed thy abused priestesses in every place. And I have stood against impious Edom, stifler of heroes and defiler of women. My loud voice has thundered when vipers have hissed and scorpions stung, against those women who were marked with the seal of thy power, all the women condemned by a world without love: mad women and holy women have become my sisters, and my mouth has piously kissed the wounds on their trembling souls, where



clotted the crimson of their veins, shed in vain. I have consoled those with a heart too heavy for their breast, I have wiped those eyes whose gaze reflects unnameable things beyond form; my hand has lifted up those poor pilgrims and put back in their hands the pilgrim's staff.

For these are the chosen ones, these are the living ones, these women consumed by an invisible fire who squeeze life with an avid caress, avid for the love of a god.

And I have avenged thy name by making them my sisters, I have extolled them in rhythms of light, those strange daughters of Orpheus; but my love, instead of descending on them, has risen up before thee; my spirit like an eagle in love with the sun, who stares and is dazzled as he ascends, soars toward thee, Istar, and burning and deadly, he will come defiantly to violate thee in thy sky.

Descend to become a woman, or love me and make me a god.

#### CHAPTER IV

### Devotions

Having chanted thus, he prostrated himself, and then, kneeling again, he put down his miter.

Then, having mounted the third step, he rubbed his lips with hyssop as a sign of humility, and began his devotions.

First he kissed each toe, laden with rings; his lips touched the cornelian on her ankle: without leaving the skin, they worked their way up over the chrysoprases that girded the knee and flowed right up to the groin, along the thigh, pushing aside the threads of sard, agate, and jade.

The belt was made of three rows of lazuli, opals, and melanites. Softly he bent his head in a symbolic meeting of two creators; the brain of genius and the womb of beauty, both moved, they appeared to impregnate and fecundate each other. Then his mouth followed the gold thread where the diamond hung very low, starring the ctenoid darkness.

The idol was quivering; long shivers ran all over her nakedness. Her beating breast shook its armor of precious stones, and the lotus trembled in the joyful hand of the goddess.

He kissed the almond-shaped garnet of her navel.

He kissed the turquoise of her left armpit, he kissed the beryl of her right armpit.

He kissed the tips of her breasts swelling through the rings; he kissed the jacinth zircon of her chin; he kissed the tourmaline of her epaulets.



He kissed the sapphire of her temples, the corundum of her ears, kissed thrice the diamond of her forehead.

Then, his kiss struck the topaz of the nape of her neck, traveled down the groove of her spine to cover one hip, then the other, below the golden leaves.

The idol, her curiosity fixed on the pontiff whom she could no longer see, was about to turn her head, defying her hieratic rigidity, when she was struck and blinded by a dazzling light.

Nebo stood before her, wearing a semicircle of incandescent magnesium wire on his tiara, the symbol of true intelligence, the unique mirror of the splendor of forms.

Nebo himself closed his eyes; verdant chrysoprases and jacinth zircons mingled with the blue of sapphires, the reddish glow of rubies, and the golden glare of topazes, illuminating her perspiring skin with ineffable reflections.

This was not the goldsmith's creation in which Gustave Moreau dressed his mythical figures; here, the settings of the jewels were invisible; they were not jewels, but luminous embers of every color, harmoniously arranged.

On the virgin's wondrous skin, the gems seemed like the blossoming, the monstrously beautiful eruption of clusters of villi in the form of precious stones.

Nebo, caught up in the hallucination in spite of himself, had the vision of a true idol whose fermenting blood spattered its skin with carbuncles: senselessly, he saw as a wonder the work of his own hands.

When the magnesium went out, they looked deeply into each other's eyes and each saw a fateful gaze, a staring gaze withholding its light, just as the chest holds in its breath at solemn moments such as the first communion or the "I do" of the wedding ceremony!

This was their wedding celebration, this marvelous extravaganza that, from one moment to the next, took over their sense of logic, and colored their souls through the prism of overheated imagination.

The pontiff and the idol contemplated each other, in no hurry to fall into each other's arms. They felt this elevation of their love to be precious, unique, with no return, and they lived it voluptuously, intoxicated yet serene.

In the hot atmosphere that slowed and amplified their breathing, they could almost hear the pulsing of their arteries; no sound reached their ears, except the tiny, intermittent crackles of the cresset where the fragrant resin was still boiling.

Then an unforeseen bejewelment covered the idol's naked skin with



pearls; glistening beads of perspiration and the smell of her femininity momentarily overwhelmed the scattered, volatilized fragrances. Then the pearls and the opals seemed to Nebo the supernatural sudor of his idol, and in spite of himself, he was being taken over by the character he was playing. The artist was falling in love with his work of art; a passion of which he did not believe himself capable made him tremble under his crimson robe.

Joyfully realizing that she was finally infiltrating her lover's consciousness, her soul was aglow, adding to the gleaming of her body. A great sigh made the gemmed corselet shudder, the diamond on her forehead and the diamond on her belly shook; the idol looked up to the sky, represented by a star-studded canopy of blue silk; Istar was fulfilled and, triumph! she had seen the awakening of the male!

## CHAPTER V

### Gemmery

Just as he had performed incantations with perfumes, so he performed incantations with gems.

He was holding a chalice into which he dipped his fingers, sprinkling a fragrant dew over the idol; but his true emotions made his improvisations seem inferior. The princess felt him curtailing the rites, quivering too much for literary composition; she knew from her own experience that the intellectual is only genuinely moved when the play of his ideas and their expression is hindered by the congestion he feels in his heart and in his loins. This deficiency of the priest's hymns made her feel jubilant; while less eloquent, there was more love and this from that same man himself whom she summoned with all her senses, with the love of her nerves and her blood.

"When it blushes like the ruby, when it shines forth like the topaz, may our love keep its finery of sapphires, may the pure Uranian ideal shine blue forever above the greyish Emery and the bronze of the Harmotomes.

"Blessed be the fertile line of green, coiling round the world; for us, let it resemble the lucid Beryls, so that our love may not bear the bloodstains of the Heliotrope."

She felt the cold stones burning her body; in spite of the hold this scene exercised on her imagination, she was watching Nebo with a moist eye; her rigid posture was truly that of a goddess, her gaze was full of meaning. Like a soul whom angels retain at the gates of paradise



to sing to her their celestial tunes, she desired to live what her ears were hearing. Such was, however, the power of the Platonist that from time to time he reminded her of her divinity and she forgot her immediate reality, fixed on the joy of the chimerical present. A touch of vertigo made her eyelids grow heavy, irritated by the violent fragrances in the air. She was a little intoxicated, an intoxication without externality, an almost intellectual intoxication, she saw two of herself: Istar the imaginary and the real Paule caused a strabismus in her imagination. Now she experienced the sensations of the idol, now those of the lover, sometimes both impressions were so closely linked that she could no longer untangle her personality from that of her role in a mental chaos in which memories of the voyage surfaced unexpectedly, more baffling still.

"Why is thy bejeweled skin covered in stones less precious than itself? Let me, with my admiring words, make the casket that is thy body glitter, and take away the carbuncles that tarnish it.

"For the gems of thy forms are only the underside and the exudate of thy dazzling depths, of thy soul, treasure of the Hesperides. The innocence, the candor, and the calm strength of the diamond gleam on thy brow. What is the emerald of thine eyes compared to the sapphire of thy soul; for thy soul is of sapphire, like the first Tables of the Law given by Moses, and thine emerald gaze like the tables of wisdom engraved by Hermes Thot.

"Abraham of Talmud kept his numerous wives shut up in a city of iron where even the sun's rays could not penetrate. For them to enjoy the light, a cup of precious stones illuminated the entire space. In the same way, O my idol, I keep the many chimera that sleep with me in turn locked away in the bronze Babylon of my proud entity and all the life around me cannot reach those favorites of my dreams.

"To vivify them and to intoxicate them with light, I have hung thee amongst them; give them life, my idol! Oh! what carbuncle, what garnet would ever glow like thy mouth, like the tips of thy breasts?"

"Thy hair covers thy head with each unrivaled lock of topaz; the spinel ruby blushes in thine ears; the Harmatome throws its reflections into the shadows of thy back. The emerald hides under thine armpits in its purest forms; in thy lap the melanite makes its nest of mysteries.

"Thy skin is of opal, covered with lazuli. Thy nails seem like transparent onyx laid on sards. Amethysts and amber blossom in the dark places of thy body, where the coral hides!

"Oh! let a pious pontiff be dazzled by thy charms and wrest from thy divinity those stones that hide thee instead of embellishing thee. Deign to appear naked, just as Istar did in times past, in the serene



splendor of thy brightness dressed only in thy noble curves, virginal, proud, and august messengers of the Absolute."

## CHAPTER VI

### Consecration

Piously, he touched the upper diamond, the lower diamond, saying:

"In the flames of my desire, goddess, become a woman!" He knelt on the third step and took the rings from her toes, putting a kiss in the place of the ornament he removed. He stripped the ankle of its ring, and the knee of its chrysoprases.

The idol shuddered with modesty when he unbuckled the belt, leaving her lap completely bare.

He stripped her breasts of their corselet; there remained nothing more than her choker and her diadem; he took them off. Chaste, the idol rested one hand on the ivory staff, and the other held the lotus: he replaced this with a lily and, passing behind the throne, he took a whole vestment of flowers with which he slowly and almost lasciviously adorned her.

He crowned her with roses, girded her with verbenas, in the costume of an amorous holocaust.

Then he strewed the steps with ferns and stripped flowers. Walking backward, with even gestures, he strewed the long and narrow path to the crimson curtains that the lilies guarded.

Shaking his empty basket in all directions, he said:

"May the sylphs only ever let my breath move, when the great Istar breathes; let only that which comes out of my body enter into her.

"May the gnomes steal away the ground from every pace of Istar that would take her away from me.

"May the water sprites keep all moisture from Istar, save the water of my mouth and my eyes.

"May the salamanders light only one flame of passion in Istar, sister of my flame.

"By the holy pentagram, may I be served in all three worlds: matter, I order; soul, I will; spirit, I adjure.

"To my command, to my will, to my concept, may there be obedience according to the Norms — by the power of the pentacles!"

He faced the idol, stretched out his arms, and proclaimed

*VELIS ME TANGERE!*



## CHAPTER VII

## Metamorphosis

The idol stood up, resplendent in her florid nudity, as if the magnetic effect of the ceremonies had raised her above that modesty that had embarrassed her at her first naked pace. Slowly, with a calm and assured Olympian brow, one hand on her left breast, the other holding the lily, barefooted and like a biblical Eve, with flowers her only veil, she walked down the steps, and with the ghostly and stiff gait of an apparition, she came to Nebo who was stretching out his arms, and who placed his hands on her naked shoulders. At this contact, she quivered.

"Goddess who hast descended for my love, thou wilt no longer ascend the throne raised upon the three symbolic steps; even the lily that thou holdest, thou wilt break its stem and throw the flower on the altar where thou too wilt be shattered, and where thy flower will fade with my kiss.

"There is still time. Nothing is decided: behind us is the throne which thou mayest still occupy; before thee is the bed to which I summon thee."

And with a flourish, he tore down the crimson curtain, with a violence symbolic of the pain accompanying the pronaos of possession.

Before the bed of verdure where leaves of rose and lily, mingled with daphne and myrtle, were piled, the virgin hesitated, unable to find the most gracious movement with which to lie down.

Four tripods of red flames were faintly glimmering at the corners of this mound. When she turned her head, darkness had fallen on the throne, the lamps had suddenly been extinguished, and the far end of the room, masked with smoke, gave the grandiose impression of a long, mysterious avenue.

The moment she believed divine, on the testimony of the poets, was approaching and she became detached, now that she was no longer thrown outside her own sex by Nebo's formal erotic denial. Femininity took hold of her once more, making her afraid with that particular anguish, which like a mythical dragon guards the threshold of debauchery. She was afraid, feeling that she was approaching her aim, a grievous fear, an accumulation of all possible fears; afraid both of disappointing and of being disappointed, of regretting the past, of appearing sensual or cold, even more disturbed as her body was as yet untouched, while her imagination had made a hundred times more voyages than her bold and curious feet.

Suddenly, Nebo seized her; she thought she had fallen into the mis-



fortune she so desired and she was convulsed by this violence after so much solemnity. But her priest merely laid her on the bed of flowers: for he had seen the genuine difficulty she was experiencing finding a way, if not the most modest, at least the most mimetically modeled, of lying down.

On her back, gracefully received into the deeply strewn flowers, she smiled, holding in both hands the remains of the lily resting on her breasts. Nebo was lost in silent admiration, abandoning the ritual; then she bent her head, and with a sidelong movement of her lips, she snatched up a rose and began to eat it.

Nebo, standing before this florid bedchamber, his arms across his chest, spoke:

"I fasted yesterday, on the eve of the Consecration, great Istar, I wrapped the talisman of the septenaries in an onager's skin and I placed it in the very center of the bed where thou art exposed; I painted on the walls of this temple twelve more or less evenly spaced chalices, from the throne thou hast just left up to the altar where thou art, six on each side and drawn above each chalice, a lingam.

"Twelve lamps were shining during my prayers; they made the crimson of the twelve lingams on the wall glow.

"I have recited the secrets and the psalms, I have donned the robe of the sacrificer, I have bent my knee and I have deprived myself of salt, but I have sprinkled my brow with hyssop, and my feet with cedar.

"And now:"

He took a rose and struck her on the brow, on the lips, on her lap:

"Open thy gates, oh thou whom I will henceforth inhabit; let thy gates be wide open, Istar, for thou hast crowned me thy king of glory."

He made the sign of Venus across the princess's chest.

"At this sign, let the shadows of thy modesty die away, for they are of no use to thee now. I will, with a possessive mouth, seize thy senses and place a seal upon them; I will brand the flock of thy beauties with my number, since I shall henceforth be their master and their shepherd: no other will ever lay claim to the pressure of thy white breast, to the view of thine abundant fleece.

"Thy brow, abode of independent thought, will now be no more than the docile mirror of my despotic understanding.

"Thine eyes, those openings through which the soul perceives the spirituality of forms and colors, will now see only me, the only spectacle admitted to their gaze, the only man granted to their contemplation.

"Thy cheeks, those vermilion fruits, will no longer blush at the desire that gazes on them: they belong to my mouth alone.



"Thy mouth has no more smiles to spend; thy lips, I alone will explore them; my teeth alone will meet thy teeth and the only water thou wilt drink will be the water of my mouth.

"Thy neck will have no necklace but mine arms; it will incline its elegant curves only to anticipate my kiss.

"Thy shoulders will carry only the burden of the sensual delights that I will lavish on thee; they will be the soft pillow of my languor alone.

"Thine arms, the ivy of my body, will not embrace anything else in this world, those beautiful vines.

"Thy hands will press only mine, for I am the whole horizon and the whole universe of your caresses.

"The tips of thy breasts will only show in my honor; thy bosom will beat only the violent rhythm that I will teach thee.

"Thy womb, the tabernacle of all spasms, will only open in my loving clasp; I alone in the world have the command and dispensation of it.

"Thy hips will only ever gird themselves with my embrace and will only ever delight mine enamored eyes.

"Thy thighs will remain closed as if guarded by the basilisk.

"Thy knees will remain joined together and will only be unjoined at my kneeling as a hierophant before thy charms.

"Thy feet shall be nailed to the ground before they walk any way other than the unique one where thy feet enter, the way of my will and pleasure; thy feet, I have sprinkled them with cedar oil, so that they may be faithful: like a gazelle fleeing defilement, O my treasure that thou art; like a statue of basalt awaiting the goodwill of my heart — for I dedicate myself to thee, living temple of my Ideal, where I will come and shed two august libations: the flowers of my blood and the carbuncle of my tears."

## CHAPTER VIII

### Sacrifice

Then the hound's claw glinted in his hand; he slashed his crimson robe; torn all down its length, it opened to reveal his vermilion nudity.

Quickly, he threw some packets of resin into the four tripods and four plumes of thick smoke united in a suffocating opacity: when they finally touched each other, they could no longer see each other.

At the moment of Psyche, the moment that precedes the great tearing of the veil of sensation, who can express the melancholy passion of that last pause on the threshold of the mystery of the body!



Ordinarily, the bestial assault of the man deprives the woman of the introspective awareness of what is going to take place; the physical violence that she suffers clouds her thoughts and, shaken in her body, she loses hold on her thoughts: the passage from desire to possession is so sudden that the great tumult sweeps away everything, pleasure and suffering.

Here, the virgin, with a clear head, saw her fatal defeat approaching. Never had that defeat seemed so threatening to the eternity of their love; an intuition overwhelmed her that their beautiful feelings, in becoming totally incarnate, would be susceptible to the laws that rule that all that is flesh will one day be corrupted, will rot and be annihilated. If only Nebo had, in his recitation, questioned her will once more, she would have said: "I shall remain your sister."

"But tomorrow?" said the ghostly young man, in the smoke that covered his nudity like an opaline shroud. She feared this lover who understood her thoughts and replied just as she conceived them; she feared this being who remained so calm at such a moment; all the terror of his power as a Magus, the extraordinary feats of his journey, which she exaggerated in her own mind, and his serenity in the face of lust, which she measured and judged. And finally, the deplorable feeling of humiliation when a woman tells herself: by taking me, he is pandering to my animality; all this turmoil overwhelmed the idol, who was once more becoming the lover desirous and yet afraid of being satisfied with ecstasy and osculation.

The reddish stain of the crimson robe had disappeared and the naked silhouette of Nebo was outlined against the fragrant fog; then nervously, with the pretty stirring of an animal in a thicket, she pulled the rose leaves toward her with both hands, covering herself with adorable ingenuousness, and sincere panic, forming a veil and a barrier. Either from some pride of his own imagining, or from the desire for a more heroic surrender, Nebo stood still, without being taken in by the adorable grace of this modesty. He wanted to set off for Cythera without any affectations, however becoming they were. His eccentricity as an aesthete did not allow a celebration of debauchery, begun as a Chaldean mystery, to end in coquettish paganism. In this room saturated with hieratic perfumes, this woman heaping stripped roses onto her naked skin struck a discord like the smell of frangipani and scented hair powder between the pages of a Bible. He wanted a consenting gesture, even more, he wanted the invitation of her body. The admirable young woman understood him, with difficulty she silenced her pride and her modesty: heroically she shut her mouth on the voices of religion and



upbringing; with a noble gesture, she swept the roses and the lilies toward Nebo and, half sitting up, she opened her beautiful arms:

"You want only to hear an entreaty; well! my Nebo, I entreat you."

So, with an effort toward the style and the movements of a bas-relief, that indicated the prodigious hold he had over his senses, Nebo rested his naked knee on the edge of the couch and holding the arms that were drawing him near, resisting them, he stared deeply into Paule's eyes.

They were beautiful like that; all obscenity fled before the great artist. Until now he had spared all vulgarity; until now, not a detail of the mimicry had rung false in the artistry of the ritual: and the sculptor of Eros the King was proud of his act of love, which had remained decorative, like a masterpiece.

His gaze mesmerized the virgin:

"No! no." she cried with a violent start. "You will not put me to sleep. You have made me believe in reality, I do not want to sleep."

And because Nebo resisted her movements, she put her arms around him, and with all the strength of a neurasthenic woman she lifted him off the ground pulling him on top of her, embracing him as if she were the male and were violating him.

The flames of the tripods writhed and languished. In this temple, where a short while ago a firm voice had uttered incantations, their breathing was the only sound, and the indefinable noise of carnal encounters, crushing the flowers. A deep tranquillity hung in this strange atmosphere, a mysterious silence resonated.

Was there a smothered cry? it was virtually imperceptible; the flames of the tripods had almost died.

O the analysis of opposites; in boudoirs and in torture chambers the same carnal fragrances sizzle, and the same smell of excited flesh lingers; the machinery of sensual delight and its emanations are unbelievably akin to that of torture and its exhalations. Is it that we are fooled by traditional categorizations, and influenced by the suggestion of our predecessors to determine whether sensations are pleasant or painful, as if a saintly woman possessed by Antinous would not suffer more pain than if she were impaled on a red-hot iron? The highest entity, that is, the being who differs absolutely from the ordinary lot of men, will always be disappointed in search of joy via the customary and standard paths.

The flames of the tripods have died, a heavy darkness hides the lovers. Perhaps a kiss slips out? Perhaps a devastating disappointment creeps between them?



Foolish dreamer! he had prepared it so divinely that his spirit trembled, incapable of following and maintaining the ideal progression of the debauchery.

This time, in truth, the silence no longer resonates; either it is one of sleep or it is a deathly hush. You would think that pain had opened its great black wings in a funereal baldachin over this first ecstasy. You would think that the hierophant had forgotten the ritual, his eloquence extinguished like the flames of the tripods; a wind of death passes over these lovers. In the silence, their passion flees, diminished.

In the silence, the disappointed voice of a woman says, almost ironically:

“Oh pontiff, is that all your idol inspires in you?”

Originally published as “Le Rituel d’amour” in vol. 3, *A Coeur perdu* (1888), of *La Décadence Latine*.







# ***Selections***

by Jean Lorrain

---

Translated by Rachel Ashton

Introduction

by Jennifer Birkett



# Carnival of Crime: The Writing of Jean Lorrain (1855-1906)

by Jennifer Birkett

Crime and the psychology of criminal behavior are interests shared by all the writers of the decadence, but in the work of Jean Lorrain they represent a determining obsession. Flamboyantly costumed, masked in makeup, flaunting his homosexuality as he flaunted his heavy emerald rings, this theatrical habitué of Parisian music halls, masked balls, and café concerts cast himself in a bewildering variety of roles. At the center of all of them is the detective, the watcher and investigator, who lives a double life, simultaneously playing along with the criminal fraternity and drawing up the chronicle of its sins. As the dossier grows, what it shows is the ubiquity of crime in modern life, of which the pimps, prostitutes, and cutthroats of Montmartre are only the most robust manifestations. Hidden away behind the closed doors of aristocratic and bourgeois privilege, concealed under those ultra-respectable masks of black frock coat and veil, the green glow of corruption flickers into sight, steadies, and spreads everywhere, fostered by Lorrain's horrified and complicitous gaze. This decadent detective is at one with the criminal he pursues, acknowledging openly that the representation of corruption is one of the most pleasurable forms that corruption can take. In this enterprise, art is the mask that both exposes and conceals culpability.

For Lorrain, art is in one sense a form of alibi, and he writes to construct versions of truth. At first sight, his work operates in two very different modes. At one extreme, in the journalism in which he engaged throughout his life, he deals in observed facts. At the other, he is a poet and the maker of dreams (e.g., *La Forêt bleue* [1883] and *Viviane* [1885]). His substantial tally of short stories, for which he is probably best known, can be divided into similar categories between narratives stamped by the realism of the *fait divers* and others formed within the varied molds of legend and fairy tale.<sup>1</sup> But these apparent opposites are two sides of the same coin or, to use his own language, two masks for the same subject, a manifestation of Lorrain's own mor-



bid fantasy. In all his prose, the worlds of reality and dream overlap in a distinctive frontier space, whose principal regions are mapped out by a voluntarily transgressive imagination: the ecstasy and terror of addiction (opium and ether), perverse sexual desire, and, most of all, the lust for murder and death.

The fairy tales collected in *Princesses d'ivoire et d'ivresse* (1902; first published in *L'Echo de Paris* and *Le Journal* from 1892 to 1899) are for modern adults, in the manner of E.T.A. Hoffmann, not Charles Perrault, and with close affinities to James Ensor's hobgoblin forms. The artist constructs the sentimental, lush loveliness of the fairy-tale mask for the sheer pleasure of cracking it, to reveal the repressed neuroses, the sadism, and the desperate craving for annihilation that are the corrupt core of contemporary desire. Sleeping Beauty is only the safe face of the Witch; the handsome prince is really a frog, or a jeweled toad; the pure-white Snow Queen is the seductive, fascinating mask of Death, escorted by the wolves and ravens of insatiable desire. The young Lorrain, listening to the story of the Snow Queen, infused the Nurse's simple images with the desires and fears of a sensibility already corrupted by the models of the adult world:

In my terrified imagination, I saw the impassive figure fly by, high in the sky, in a white cloud of whirling bees; great black crows fluttered all around her, screaming hunger, screaming winter; from her shoulders, a great cloak of moonbeams streamed far out into the night, and when the ice froze thick, in my mind, it was she who came, with the tips of her stiff fingers, drawing on the window glass the great fantastic frost flowers and trees, and at midnight, I was always afraid that I would see appearing at my windowpanes the dead eyes and luminous brow of the sleeping queen, because I had listened carefully to the legend, and I knew that when the Snow Queen looks at you her soul is somewhere else and her eyes cannot see you: she is far, far away, far beyond the Arctic Ocean, in the polar ice packs, far, far away, far over deserts and seas.<sup>2</sup>

On closer inspection, Lorrain's journalism turns out to be as fanciful as his fairy tales. The chronicles he wrote for the popular press (*L'Événement* [1887–90], *L'Echo de Paris* [1890–95], and *Le Journal* [1895–1905]) were essentially gossip columns, personal commentary on fashions in art, writing, and politics and on snippets of news. In this no-man's-land between truth and invention, history slides easily into story. In Lorrain's accounts of the contemporary moment, *fait divers* and *conte* are interchangeable. "Hard" evidence becomes open,



as a result, to construction into a range of different cases. This detective-observer functions also as judge in the case, and the judgments he brings to bear are markedly diverse. The games of truth that post-modernist ethics claims as its own here emerge as part of the founding turmoil of modernism.

Lorrain delights in the creation of ambivalence, not merely for its own sake but for the range of moral inflections it allows him to give to a single theme. His accounts of crime, delivered from a right-wing anarchist perspective, vary according to the social place of the criminal.<sup>3</sup> Collected in, for example, *La Petite classe* (1895) and *Madame Baringhel* (1899), his chronicles satirically portray a bourgeois Paris seized with a grotesque craving for corruption and perversion, which is the fruit of the respectable repression of desire.<sup>4</sup> As the dedication to *Le Crime des riches* (1905) indicates, middle-class crime is not to be condoned: "The fancies that take their monstrous birth from the spinelessness and boredom of usurped wealth bring in their wake every defect . . . and though rich men's crimes escape the law, protected as they are by the cowardice of governments and people, Nature, more real than society, sets her anarchic example by abandoning the wretched time servers of Capital to the shame and madness of the worst aberrations."<sup>5</sup> Working-class crime is presented as a more understandable phenomenon, the natural product of the urban landscape created by capitalist exploitation. Crimes committed among the seething masses are sources of pleasurable curiosity for Lorrain and his readers, but the frisson they manufacture is double-edged. For a society whose unconscious still contains the repressed terrors of the Commune, working-class crime symbolizes the "irrational" frenzy of the mob, straining on the thin leash of the institutions of order. When Lorrain writes of Jack the Ripper prowling the gloomy fogs of Whitechapel, he plays conscious, dangerous games with moral panic. Only the thin line of the Channel protects respectable France from the Ripper: "a man whose brain is terribly deranged, one of these passionate deviants who are the enigmas of modern medicine and spread panic among contemporary moralists, and who — a sad fact for our neighbors across the Channel — are the special prerogative of the English."<sup>6</sup>

In striking contrast, a kind of tragic heroism is attributed to aristocratic crime, which is presented as the last gesture of individual resistance to the numbing conformity imposed by middle-class democracy. The model of such defiance is the Marquis de Sade, celebrated in the short story "Dolmance" (collected in *Sensations et souvenirs* [1895]). Sade is the avatar of Lorrain's two famous nightmare creations: Phocas,



the eponymous vampire-hero of the novel *Monsieur de Phocas: Astarte* (1901), and Count Noronsoff, the brutal tyrant of *Le Vice errant* (1902), who both in their own way serve the artistic cause of death and corruption. The indestructible Phocas flits quietly around Europe, spreading his murderous gospel, feeding his victims the slow, corrupting poison of the images of love and death enshrined in Gustave Moreau's paintings, hanging in the dark gallery of the Rue de la Rochefoucauld. Noronsoff, the aristocratic actor-producer who dominates the carnival of the Riviera, the ironic figure of the decadent artist, supplies entertainment for the mob that finally devours him. Noronsoff's last production — the *summum* of decadent vice — requires for its evocation a synthesis of all the arts. Writing — the forms of literary narrative — supplies the key that turns dream into historical reality ("The story," says its narrator, "begins like a fairy tale and ends like a chapter from Suetonius, with marginal notes by Saint-Simon"<sup>7</sup>). But to reach the ultimate climax and to symbolize adequately the death of history that is the highest ambition of decadence, narrative form must also call on theater, painting, the arts of costume, and the jeweler's skills. In the final pages, the icon that drives the mob to a frenzy of desire and transforms it into an instrument of murder and destruction is a young homosexual Bacchus, carried high in theatrical procession, dressed "in a mad, indescribable costume like Salmambo in Gustave Flaubert or Heliogabalus in Jean Lombard's *L'Agonie*; and Moreau paints like that. He seems to be dressed in ashes, ashes sparkling with watery glinting gems."<sup>8</sup> Art makes murder into the supreme image of Beauty and in so doing sets free the vengeful God.

The mask of art is the means through which corruption is spread. The mask makes vice seem beautiful, turns squalor and nastiness into glamorous thrill, seduces the onlooker into the game — and leaves him, or her, with the corpse on his hands. In "L'Un d'eux" (in *Histoires de masques* [1900]), Lorrain spells out the confidence trick that the artist-masker practices on his victims, drawing them into the circle of crime:

The mask is the disturbed and disturbing face of the unknown, the smile of the Lie, the very soul of perversity, that corrupts as it terrifies; it's lust spiced with fear, the delightful, anguished risk of the challenge it poses to sensual curiosity: "Is she ugly? Is he good-looking? Is he young? Is she old?" It's flirtation with a touch of the macabre, seasoned, maybe, with a touch of squalor and a drop of blood; because where might the adventure finish? In a furnished room or the townhouse of a great courtesan, perhaps in the police station, because thieves also conceal themselves to commit



their crimes, and masks, with their disturbing, dreadful false faces, belong as much to cutthroats as cemeteries; in the mask, there's the pickpocket, the harlot, and the specter.<sup>9</sup>

Everyone in decadent society, Lorrain urges, is guilty. Everyone loves masking murder and takes masochistic pleasure in the risk of discovery and punishment. What Lorrain offers is a sanitized risk. Like his models, Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe, he sells fear within limits, a flirtation with criminal transgression that constantly declares itself a game, played in the confines of personal imagination, where society's judgments and punishments have no force. At the same time, with a last cynical flourish, his writing also makes plain that there is a price to be paid for the dream, privately, by the dreamer. J.-K. Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* called in the doctor at the end, to cure his neurasthenia, and returned to the bosom of society. Lorrain cashes in on the fear of irrevocable self-loss that comes from playing with irrationality. He transforms impotence before evil into the ultimate narrative thrill. The "cured" ether addict in "Un Crime inconnu" watches through a hole while a murder is committed in the hotel room next door. He cannot tell whether what he is watching is an act of pleasure or pain, he cannot intervene, he does not know whether what he views is reality or dream, all he knows is the thrill of the abyss: "Oh, the pallor of those outstretched, tortured hands, trailing ecstatically in the tumbling folds of the specter's gown . . . and while he croaked his last agony, in a long strangled shriek from the black hole of his wide open mouth, the form evaded his grasp, slipped back, dragging with it the hypnotized wretch sprawling at its feet."<sup>10</sup>

In this image, Lorrain embodies the criminal delight of decadent art: the watcher who records the crime (both the artist and the consumer of art) is constructed as marginal, powerless to act, and so exculpated from action, passive subject of a complex pleasure, condemning and yet enjoying suffering imposed on others, and condemning himself for his own enjoyment. In this masochistic celebration of disempowerment, the sharpest pleasure recorded is that of the death of some important part of humanity. The dignity of human life is the ultimate victim of Lorrain's art, thrown away in a welter of delighted self-disgust.

In the spectrum of Lorrain's writing, the short stories included in this anthology stand at the realist end. In contrast to the melodramas discussed above, these are slow-burning narratives, machines constructed to build and foster unease at the underside of the respectable



masks of modern life. In all these stories, the observing narrator standing at the margins of the action — the journalist-detective — spots clues (behavior, body language, speech) and follows up traces, often literally, through the streets and public places of modern Paris. The observing eye of the artist builds up a dossier of a particular perversion, which turns out to be a representative case. These short stories all note symptoms of a widespread plague, a prevailing contemporary neurosis that professional observers, from police to psychiatrists, have already classified according to unerring taxonomies. In Lorrain's writing, the Naturalist and scientific strand of decadent fantasy is clearly apparent; these tales can be read with profit alongside those of Guy de Maupassant and Huysmans.

"The Man Who Loved Consumptives" (included in this volume), presents typical modern man in his typical modern setting: the necrophiliac in the theater. In a society constituted of show and display, humanity is replaced by costume ("the dress," "the black suit") and by mask. Human contact takes the form of looks and glances, eyes peering through opera glasses, and the gossipy exchanges of cynical and clinical voices. The narrative form reenacts the contextual reality: after a brief, third-person description of the decor, the rest of the tale is delivered as dialogue, from the mouths of two watching male masks.

All eyes in fashionable society are riveted on the couple, man and woman, who are society's mirror. The sick woman is a vulnerable body, written over with easily decipherable messages of sick sensuality, a bundle of medical symptoms, pale, frail, with blue-rimmed eyes, her breathing nervous and shallow, biting her bloody crimson lips or nibbling at the sickly sweet Parma violets fed her by her over-attentive escort. The man, in direct contrast, is robust, healthy, in evening clothes and white waistcoat, a smooth surface whose secrets can only be told by the complicitous, knowing observer. This near-necrophiliac, "model for us all," is an artist in crime who operates within the legal and customary limits of respectable society. He grows fat and ruddy on the agonies of his mistresses, suffocating, shivering, and collapsing with them in acts of love that double the act of dying. The cynical mask who details his exploitative pleasures makes, in casual passing, the link between the pursuit of personal satisfaction and the breakdown of social relationships. This model saves the trouble of creating and sustaining the links of common humanity. It cuts out the boredom of marriage and saves all the "troublesome" rituals of breaking off relationships. In the closing exchanges, the theatrical image is reworked to characterize the generic social performance of this couple: wedding



ritual and funeral ritual are fused into one. Death, literally, is the last word of the story for this degenerate age: "this age of disbelief and sordid gain, where only consumption and tuberculosis still kill" (p. 894).

The female counterpart of the necrophiliac hero appears in "The Unknown Lady" (included in this volume). She is not so common a breed, and less easy to spot. This time, the observing "I" needs the help of the Impressionist painter, whose art places him in regular contact with the demimonde and who, in his turn, invokes the help of journalists, police, and police spies to disentangle the truth. In this tale, the prey is hard to catch. Spotted in another theatrical decor, the Opera, the woman in mask and hood is tracked through a sequence of fragmented nighttime adventures and then into a tale told by the painter, which enters another tale and needs even more takes for its elucidation. At the end of the narrative chase, the woman is exposed as Messalina, the type of the femme fatale. This nymphomaniac with blood-red lips, well known to the police, is a wealthy provincial of good family who comes regularly to Paris to pick up minor semicriminal members of the bohemian fringe. She enjoys the degradation of affairs with men she despises, and, even more, she enjoys tempting her lovers to more serious crimes, especially murder. As the long narrative unwinds to its amazing conclusion, the mask turns into a ghoul, addicted to the spectacle of the guillotine falling on her lovers. In a last twist, the guilt of her crime is extended to the whole of society, which cannot touch her and seemingly has no wish to do so. The monster that runs loose in the Paris jungle goes home to the provinces to fulfill its function as the cornerstone of traditional French society: the church-going wife and mother.<sup>11</sup>

"One Snowy Night" (included in this volume) is a different kind of exploration of the nightmare alleys that lie behind the respectable front of the Church. On this occasion, the story begins in the cathedral of Notre-Dame, at the close of one of Monsabre's fashionable sermons (another kind of contemporary theater), and moves into the tangle of the poor quarter behind. The darkness of the church, with its dim lamp and mysterious flickering stained glass, is replaced by the no-less-mysterious warren of Parisian back streets and the confusion of darkness and falling snow. The tale comes to its final unfolding in the back room of a cheap cabaret.

This time, the starting point of the enigma, the mysterious woman pursued by the watchers, turns out to be another victim, a prostitute condemned by poverty to vice and suffering. The villains of this tale are again the men, a pimp, and a client (a rich American, from the top



of high society), who join forces in the exploitation of the female body, the one for profit, the other for pleasure. The pimp explains in his own argot the mystery of the street encounters that have baffled the journalist and his friend. For him, this is purely business. He has just beaten and intimidated his wife into accepting a client who terrifies all the local prostitutes with his penchant for pretending to cut his lovers' throats. This familiar piece of sadistic decadent play (popularized in Huysmans's *Là-bas* [1891], in which Gilles de Rais applied it to his child victims) is simply a joke for the pimp, until his interlocutors point out its potential seriousness and he runs off in panic to protect his working capital. What happens to the woman, in the end, is not disclosed. The journalist's friend, like the pimp, ends the story with a joke indicating that for them, too, she was mere material for exploitation — matter for a story to offer to an editor.<sup>12</sup> Art, vice, and cash come together, in conclusion, in a summary of decadent values.

This triple nexus is the guilty secret that all Lorrain's tales both indict and confess. "The Man Who Made Wax Heads" (included in this volume) brings together all the motifs touched on in the tales analyzed above in a clear-sighted exposure of the complicities that bind the forms of decadent art and the criminal exploitations of the Paris streets. The opening setting is the dimly lit display hall of a painting studio. In this twilight world of art, between reality and dream, the woman who poses the initial enigma is a patent invention, a painted statue, with the familiar "scarlet" smile and challenging blue eyes that mark for Lorrain the icon of contemporary desire. This, the owner of the studio tells the narrative "I," is the artist's reproduction of feminine reality, far better than the original. This "Valkyrie" is a formal re-presentation of a streetwalker model no one would look at twice on the street. This tale, and its tellers, have, indeed, neither time nor inclination to linger in the streets, which are only the raw material of art. The mystery of the work of art bypasses the shady passages of base reality and leads straight to the maker's studio.

Here all the evidence of "the" time-honored link between art and crime is on display. Lorrain's narrative itself constructs this historical link, displacing its origins from his own played-out fin-de-siècle moment to an invented French Renaissance, where northern (Germanic) energy fused, he says, with the corrupt sophistication of Italian culture, creating a new kind of art. In this typical decadent romance, the artist himself is the point of origin of this fusion. Lorrain draws him in fact as the personification of original sin, Milton's Satan: young, virile, sardonic, sensual, the Renaissance warrior-aristocrat. His works



spell out his stature among the criminals of high art. A statue of "Perversity," another feminine image, is linked with the "witchcraft" of the poisoner-sorceress Catherine de' Medici and the massacre of Saint Bartholomew. These damp pink lips, "I" surmises, are stained with the blood of murdered Protestants. Even more significant are two wax heads of Lorenzo de' Medici as virile young man and as anguished adolescent. "I" is irresistibly drawn to the second. Of indeterminate sex, pale complexion, and faded pink lips, this head suggests a nightmare history of sufferings, imposed under the perverted sign of pleasure. The artist casually reveals its source. Like the woman who sparked this chase, the model for the statue came in from the Paris streets, a commonplace urchin, one of the masses dying of hunger and vice. The decadent artist markets other people's pain; this wax, the text states, was "modeled out of terror." People who buy this art must confess that pain is what they want. "I", deciding to buy the head when he hears that the boy died, acknowledges his complicity with the artists in exploitation and enjoyment of the child. And by implication, the circle of guilt extends to embrace the reader, caught in the fascinating machinery of the narrative, right to the final line, which closes the trap: "This is the waxwork you must have" (p. 899).

Here, in Lorrain's poisoned little jewel of a tale, the consummate achievement of decadent art is caught in miniature. The genius of the artist entangles perpetrators and victims in a sticky web of perverse delights, in which exploitation becomes collusion, the ripples of guilt spread outward, and the real criminal slips away. In the end, responsibility is lodged firmly with the consumer, forced — he must confess — by his own perverse desires, to buy into the values of this particularly black market.

---

#### NOTES

1. Jean Lorrain's short-story collections include *Sonyeuse: Soirs de province, soirs de Paris* (1891), *Buveurs d'âmes* (1893), *Sensations et souvenirs* (1895), *Histoires de masques* (1900), *Le Crime des riches* (1905), and *Pelléastres: Le Poison de la littérature* (1910).

2. "Les Contes," in *Sensations et souvenirs* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1895), p. 237.

3. An early but still useful account of Lorrain's politics may be found in Pierre Léon Gauthier, *Jean Lorrain: La Vie, l'oeuvre et l'art d'un pessimiste à la fin du 19e siècle* (Paris: André Lesot, 1935). Gauthier initially confuses the issue by attributing Lorrain's



humanitarian and paternalist rhetoric to "socialist" commitment but ultimately assigns him correctly to a right-wing anarchist position characterized by anti-Semitic, nationalist, and anti-Dreyfusardian sympathies.

4. For other Parisian chronicles, see *Pelléastres* (1910) and *La Ville empoisonnée; Pall-Mall Paris* (1936).

5. Jean Lorrain, *Le Crime des riches* (Paris: Douville, 1905).

6. "La Terreur à Londres," in *Pelléastres* (Paris: Méricourt, 1910), p. 190 (in the sequence "Crimes de Montmartre et d'ailleurs"), first published in *L'Événement* (1888-89).

7. Jean Lorrain, *Le Vice errant II*. in *Les Noronsoff* (Paris: Librairie Ollendorff, 1922), p. 7.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 306.

9. Jean Lorrain, "L'Un d'eux," in *Histoires de Masques* (Paris, 1900), p. 5.

10. "Un Crime inconnu," in *ibid.*, p. 69. See also "Contes d'un buveur d'ether," in *Sensations et souvenirs*.

11. Lorrain's friend and ally, the novelist Rachilde, presents similar portraits of the wealthy ghoul who preys on "innocent" working lads in her novels *Monsieur Vénus* (1884; reprinted in this volume) and *La Marquise de Sade* (1887). Lorrain's tale has its origins in the scandal of the Pranzini affair. Pranzini was executed for murder in August 1887 and swarms of fashionable women flocked to see him guillotined. See Philippe Jullian, *Jean Lorrain ou le Satiricon 1900* (Paris: Fayard, 1974), p. 117.

12. In "Le Métier de femme" (in *Pelléastres*), Lorrain writes: "These are dreadful days for women. For respectable and licentious alike, love comes down to a razor blade over the carotid artery or two bullets in the head."



## CONTENTS

THE MAN WHO LOVED CONSUMPTIVES . . . . .	891
THE MAN WHO MADE WAX HEADS . . . . .	894
THE UNKNOWN LADY . . . . .	899
ONE SNOWY NIGHT . . . . .	919



## THE MAN WHO LOVED CONSUMPTIVES

"I SAY! THERE'S yet another new one!" uttered the elegant black suit sitting in front of me in the orchestra stalls, during the second act of Legendre's play, and, smiling into his mustache, he fixed his opera glasses on one of the boxes at the edge of the dress circle, where a tall, slender young woman had just entered, quite pale in an exquisite dress of pale blue tulle that made her look all the more pale.

This took place in the middle of the second act, the act in the chapel, when Sir Claudio, his brow knit and his hand on the hilt of his sword, inveighs against Leonato and the candid Hero in the celebrated Shakespearean apostrophe:

"Keep your daughter, she is too dear!"

Captivated the theater was by the drama of the scene and by the brilliance of Roybert's costumes glittering against Ziem's remarkable watercolor, which Porel had incorporated into the scenery. All eyes, all spyglasses had followed the direction of the opera glasses, and the fragile creature, leaning on the red velvet parapet of her box, in all her disturbing, spectral pallor, seemed resplendent under the gaze of all the men and women, suddenly fixed on her.

A thin oval face, with a languid expression full of pain: her wide, dark ultramarine eyes were disturbing, so passionate and sorrowful in their bruised bluish hollows, a delicate nose with animated nostrils that twitched as if she were gasping for air in an atmosphere too thin and inadequate to sustain life, and, with her great plumed fan held close to her flat chest, she occasionally bit the burning crimson flesh of her lips, the enamel of her teeth flashing against the redness of her mouth, so hard as to draw blood. Next to her a man had taken his seat, tall, robust, in good health, in the very prime of life and dressed very correctly with the wide moiré rope of his pince-nez hanging across his white evening waistcoat, the outfit of a clubman obsessed by the princely elegance of some Sagan, and he leaned toward the frail pale woman, murmuring



in her ear and offering her some crystallized Parma violets from a bag of soft silk, which she nibbled at, half smiling and choking.

"That new one won't last long," the neighbor of the black suit in front of me sniggered. "She won't last more than two months: that little lady has reached the suffocation stage; she probably coughs up lungfuls of blood, and she must be pretty hot stuff between midnight and two o'clock, when her fever rises. Very pretty, too; if a little thin."

He had taken the spyglass from his friend's hands, and, with the lenses riveted to the box, he scrutinized every contortion of the pale blue dress and every assiduity of the large white waistcoat.

"Devilish taste, I must say," continued my ogler, "loving skeletons of women and devoting himself to the obsequies of love."

"Dear Fauras, I only ever see him with graveyard Venuses, and always someone new. How many mistresses has he already gotten rid of?"

"Oh, three or four in two years. He's a monomaniac; you'd think he gets them from the hospital: illness, and above all consumption, is what enchants him. We've had 'the executioner's mistress,' he's 'the lover of the doomed,' in love with elegies and tears. Good old Fauras, he keeps himself in good health, but he only loves those who are going to die: the fragility of their existence makes them all the more precious and dear to him; he gasps for air during their attacks, shivers during their fevers, and, attentive to their every sigh, leaning over them as they suffocate, aching with pleasure, he follows the progress of their pain, feeling their spasms and living their agony, a true Sybarite!"

"Yes, I know; a savage fellow, rather like a sadist tormented by macabre ideas, virtually a necrophiliac, requiring a trace of heat in the corpse and seeking in death the last savor of love: the crime of Saint Ouen renewed every evening in the privacy of his bedchamber and the curiosity of the senses safeguarded from judicial inquiry by the victim's semblance of life."

"Oh! What a mistake, my dear man, how far you are from the truth! Fauras is a sweet man, elegiac, obsessed by exquisite impressions of sadness, driven wild by mourning; he wears mourning in his thoughts and has a funeral urn in the place of a heart; deliciously distressed and in the seventh heaven to be so, on his latest lovers he continually lays the branches of his evergreen cypress of grief—the phoenix constantly reborn!"

"I vow I still do not understand a thing."

"What a coarse man you are! Loving a woman who is going to die is knowing that the moments for kisses and caresses are numbered, feeling with her death rattle time inexorably flowing away and lost for-



ever: despairing in advance and yet intoxicated, conscious that each sensual delight experienced is a step nearer the tomb, and, with hands trembling with horror and desire, in your bedchamber you dig the grave where they will lay your beloved, that is the beauty of it all! You need never to have known the bitter allure of hasty encounters whence there is no turning back, if you can't understand that melancholic and obsessive intoxication, the intoxication of those liaisons irremediably marked by Death and Pleasure!"

"Monstrous!"

"But absolutely true. Fragility is the great attraction of creatures and things, flowers would be less pleasing if they did not wither; the quicker the flower dies, the more sweet it smells; its life is exhaled with its perfume! The same goes for the doomed woman; as she dies, she frantically abandons herself to the sensual pleasures that make her live so much more intensely while killing her slowly; her moments are numbered; her thirst for love and her need to suffer burn and inflame her, she clings to love with the desperate convulsions of a drowning woman, and, full of desire, gathering all her strength in a final kiss, Death already wringing her in his hands, she would kill with pleasure, if she were not dying from it herself, kill the man she desperately adores, whose long, strong, and passionate embrace makes her faint and die."

"Delightful!"

"Yes, delightful is the love of consumptives! And then there is another advantage, Fauras thus avoids the often brutal adieus, coming even from a gallant man, at the necessary term of an affair, those scenes of rupture often more than tiresome, and always disagreeable, from the government bonds right down to the vitriol, all the repellent filth you get at the end of a lease: practical and delicate, he never knows the inevitable disillusionment of prolonged relationships, the distressing and dreary satiety of chronic idylls and rancid liaisons; his affairs are resolved on the white sheet embroidered with pale silver of a young woman's coffin, bestrewn with violets and roses, in the light of candles, to the sound of organs and epithalamiums; and the bride in death resembles Ophelia, and he, like a modern Hamlet, follows his beloved's cortege, and if his heart is broken in places, his suffering at least has a beautiful backdrop, flowers and incense, music and the priest's psalms in the grand finale of a moving scene; the suffering of an artist, in a word, but of a practical artist and a businessman, for death acts as his counselor and guide, and he has made the keeper of Montmartre Cemetery responsible for the liquidation of his emotions; better still, he weeps sincerely for his mistress; when she is dead, he puts her favorite flowers on her



grave, weeds devoutly around the metal palings, warming the hearts of the dead woman's relatives who stand beside him, and his life, embellished with fond images and the faint phantoms of other women, flows on, melancholy and tender, shared between the dear friend of yesterday and the one of tomorrow, fragrant with nostalgia, quivering with echoes, thrilled with hope, and tinged with memories!"

"A monster, a wretch, a..."

"Great voluptuary and a wise man, my dear friend, for he has known how to benefit from Death in the amorous activities of his life, how to substantiate his dreams by idealizing that wretch, Memory; and he is our master, one and all, my dear man, whatever one may say, for he is the only man to weep genuinely for his mistresses, and the only one who knows today how to savor regret, that philter, that poison which, in times past, caused the death of lovers in legends, and on which today feed the last lost lovers of this century, in this age of disbelief and sordid gain, where only consumption and tuberculosis still kill."

Originally published as "L'Amant des poitrinaires," in *Sonyeuse: Soirs de province, soirs de Paris* (1891).

## THE MAN WHO MADE WAX HEADS

*For Henry Bauër*

IT PURSUED ME like an obsession. It was the face of a woman with a truly strange, mute expression, with hard blue eyes sunken under the arch of her brow, her nose straight, and, under the blonde hair gathered into bunches at either side of her face, a forehead marked with stubborn lines.

Her shining, smooth yellow hair resembled a helmet and seemed to form metal plates on the nape of her neck; but the great charm and the real enigma of this obstinately silent face was its smile, a scarlet smile formed by full and sinuous lips, as if sealed by some timid vow, the imperious smile of a self-denying soul, a smile that was no smile.

Modeled from pure wax, she was delicately shaded and intricately detailed, and in the half light of the studio I had just entered on the heels of Gormas, that head said, "no," without moving on its plinth, almost supernatural in the intensity of its proud mouth and its eyes of lapis. Was it the effect of the light? In the equivocal decor of the hall encumbered with curios, antique fabrics, and the pale nudity of stat-



ues vaguely animated by the darkness, an imperceptible dilation of her nostrils, due, no doubt, to some trick of the light, appeared to accentuate even more her untamed expression of challenge.

"*Symphonica heroica* — the heroic symphony," Gormas whispered in my ear. I had neared the plinth, trying to decipher the bizarre letters written there.

"Yes, Beethoven's 'Eroïca' — no more no less — but the strange thing is that a woman with this face exists, this reluctant smile and this Valkyrie profile prowl from dusk till dawn through the streets of Anteuil, and you can see her there each day."

"A model," I ventured, intrigued.

"No. She consented once only to sit as a model and then not without difficulty, she did not want to become a goddess, but we begged and pleaded with her. You must admit that it would have been a shame for such a woman not to allow us to evoke such a vision."

With his hands clasped behind his back, Gormas was staring, as was I, at the painted wax, with eyes full of distant and dreamy admiration.

"Yes, it reconciles you to life," he continued, pursuing his reverie. "It almost compensates for the weariness of existence. You can meet such creatures in the world, but do we now? No, for if you crossed Dawnlight in the street (that is what we call her), you would not recognize her. The best proof of this is that you have probably already seen her a hundred times and she has never struck you. A pretty woman passing by is the possibility of a night's entertainment, or the impossibility — five or twenty gold louis makes the difference: at twenty you desire it; at our age, alas, you look at her with a sigh of regret and let her go by. You're so tired, you've seen it all before, with others and one-self: the heart is fearful. Why bother starting again? There is no truth in women other than the idea we have of them. We sing romances to dolls, and, if the singer has something in his guts, the doll turns into a statue. Look at this wax. Dawnlight is a beautiful pink-and-blond girl whom Paris has turned into a kept woman. Ringel met her and drew from her this mysterious expression of heroism and refusal."

"It is Ringel whom we must thank then." And I asked: "And who is this Ringel?"

"Ringel," Gormas replied, "a misunderstood man, a very curious man who would interest you and to whom I will introduce you... He lives a short distance from here on Avenue du Pont-du-Jour. Come and get me one morning and I will take you to his studio, but let me tell him in advance. He is a sensitive fellow, quick to take offense and a little wild. Thrown out of the Champ de Mars and the Champs-Élysées, hav-



ing formerly obtained a medal of honor, he feels persecuted, the victim of some cabal or, at the very least, of an injustice, and he does not easily let people cross his threshold. And he's a violent man, he has the true spirit of an adventurer, physically he looks like a real Renaissance condottiere, he will interest you enormously. But it's already dark, allow me to light the lamps." — "Don't bother," I told him and took my leave.

A warehouse with a glass roof at the back of a courtyard is surrounded by an open-work fence: a ring tied to a rope sets a rusty bell shaking, a tall, svelte, muscular lad in a blue tight-fitting jersey half opens the door of the warehouse. "Come in!" he calls to us.

It is Ringel; and now, sitting in his studio, peopled with monumental chalky-white statues and, scattered on little tables, the disturbing smiles of frozen painted wax, I watch this lithe, tall lad with the fair complexion, tanned and baked by the sun, bustling about the damp clay, rough-hewing it with the nimbleness of a clown and the attentive suppleness of a watchful cat, and I cannot help running through in my mind all the more or less absurd, wild stories that have been told to me about this Ringel. His expressive, stubborn face, his sardonic, sensual mouth, and even his warm coloring, darker than his light yellow mustache, are indeed those of an audacious, adventurous fellow. He recalls one of those bold companions, half Lorrainese, half German, whom the Guises brought to the Court of the Valois and whom one is quite taken aback to find in the chronicles of the time, leaning nonchalantly on their elbows, a dagger in one hand and a cup-and-ball in the other, under the coffered ceiling of the Louvre decorated with fleurs-de-lis, their smiles sharpened by the corruption of the era — dangerous, refined men, turned Italian among the Florentine intrigues of a Henry I and a Catherine.

Almost directly in front of me was a plaster cast, the tall figure of a naked woman with an equivocal smile, standing with her weight on one leg, bending toward a small mirror that she was holding in her hand. Her wavy hair crisscrossed with threads of pearls must have belonged to Mme de Sauve or to one of those maids-of-honor, corrupted and corrupting, paid by Mme Catherine to dissipate the energies and loosen the vows of the supporters of Béarn and Lorraine, enemies of the king. If the theory of avatars is correct, it was in some tapestry-hung corridor in the châteaux of Blois or Amboise that Ringel must have formerly met with this insidious, smiling creature. She smelled of traps, pitfalls, and lust, and on the eve of the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, like many other women then, she would most certainly have furiously embraced the murderer of the day in her bed still warm from the previous night's



Protestant, ecstatic to find the taste of the victim's blood on the lips of her adored lover of the moment. "Perversity" the statue was entitled; and I recalled the scandal she had provoked in the Salon of 1878, the protests and prudery aroused by the warm transparency of her flesh, the shine of her knees and the pink moistness of her lips; for the figure was made entirely of wax, throbbing in her equivocal and seductive pose with such life that she set one's nerves on edge like a threat of danger, all the while inflaming desire. The crowd had flocked there as if to witness an indecent act, so much so that those in high places were disturbed, and the order came to take down the scandalous statue, but the artist would not have it. Having been selected by the jury, he recognized only the jury's right to suppress his work, and, with the violence of a man from another era, he mounted guard for two nights, clutching a revolver, in front of his painted waxwork. Like a chivalrous knight at the foot of his lady's tower, he was ready for anything in order to protect her, and when the commissioners dispatched by the authorities came to take away the statue, my man courageously engaged the enemy in combat at the feet of his "Perversity," who, pushed and pulled from all sides, broke and collapsed on her plinth, the strange symbol of a work of art refusing to survive the affront inflicted on its creator.

This adventure à la Benvenuto Cellini was very much his style, and, the more I looked at him with his bold profile, his close-shaven head, and the vehement nape of his neck under the curling light of his mane, the better I could imagine him proudly camped before his statue, his arms crossed over his chest, standing up to the crowd and defying people to touch his work of art. And why had this "Perversity" collapsed so suddenly? Was it pure coincidence, or was this man not something of a magician?

He must have brought back from Florence, or at the very least from that Valois court where he had lived among Mme Catherine and René the Florentine in a society devoted to the science of philters and bewitchment, a few of the mysterious and captivating secrets of the occult arts. For, amid the plaster busts and the clay masks, the two wax faces where my eye was lingering seemed strangely alive: two heads styled in the Florentine manner, the heavy hair typical of Renaissance figures haloing their foreheads like a cloud. One was the head of a boy between twenty and twenty-five years old with a severe profile, thick beardless lips, pronounced jawbones, and a flawless chin, vaguely recalling the Lorenzo de' Medici found in museums. He had the gorget of a roughneck soldier, the bulge of a breastplate, and, on his brown curls, the steel plates of a helmet completed the composition; it was a vigorous and bold work



of art. The other, on the contrary, was the head of a woman or a young boy, both stubborn and sorrowful with its lips of faded pink. The transparency of its slightly feverish flesh and the terror of its staring eyes were vividly alive and suffering and a mysterious, cruel charm emanated from its young, terrified, and silent face.

The sorrowful head, passionate and sickly  
Has in the mournful attraction of its native grace  
The charm of a virgin or a perverse boy

A prelate's favorite or a wise Ophelia,  
Its enigma is suffering, intoxication, madness,  
Which, like a black philter, flows from its green eyes.

Certainly, these dark-ringed eyes and this paleness spoke volumes in their silence; she had suffered in body and soul. To what horrible sensual pleasures had she been initiated? A sense of pity took hold, spiced with a strange, unwholesome curiosity, before these childlike eyes that had become the eyes of a woman, confronted with some atrocious nightmare. I could imagine the sinister adventure of this guilty face in the Château of Tiffauges, in the lair of Gilles de Rais, and then I recalled those mysterious stories about the waxworkers of the Middle Ages and the public reprobation attached to their trade. Did they not live in cellars, in the eternal twilight propitious for enchantments and apparitions? Their visionary art (who, more than they, evoked a truer image of life?) was closely related to that of the magicians: bewitchments were carried out with wax figures, witch trials are full of them, and one particular legend haunted me above all, that of the modeler from Anspach who slowly squeezed the soul and the life out of his model in order to animate his painted waxwork, and then, having finished his work of art, awaited nightfall to go and bury the corpse in the ditch at the city walls.

Had Ringel read my thoughts? "A pretty face, is it not?" he said, pointing to the waxwork that seemed petrified by fear. "A little Italian boy posed for it, and artists today claim that there are no more models, they simply do not know how to see. I met that one in the street, one December evening, shivering, gaunt, and virtually begging. He took me for a policeman and looked so afraid . . . it is his terror I captured, he was so delightfully afraid." — "And what became of him?" I demanded, a little disturbed. "Really! How can one know what becomes of them all, when they pose too young and spend their childhood trying to cheat poverty in Paris? I believe he died of consumption." — "Are you sure?"



I insisted — “Oh yes, he did indeed die, little Antonio Monforti, in Beaujon, isn’t that right, Gormas?” And, Gormas, having nodded his head, I heard a voice whispering in my ear: “This is the waxwork you must have.”

Originally published as “L’Homme aux têtes de cire,” in *Buveurs d’âmes* (1893).

## THE UNKNOWN LADY

### I

AT THE LAST ball at the opera, around half past one in the morning, already wearied by four tours of the room, who knows how many comings and goings around the foyer and behind the boxes, we ran aground, Inotey the Impressionist painter and I, near the grand staircase in one of the loggias of the promenade, and there, half sitting on the marble banister, in one of the intercolumniations, its friezes of double shafts rising in tiers above our heads, we chatted, our backs more or less turned to the crowd, teasing the exaggerated points of our patent leather shoes with the ends of our evening canes: yes, quite indifferent, really, to the incessant passage of women brushing past us with mantillas and ebony whistles in search of accomplices, we were discussing beauty and how it is more and more impossible to find it today among so-called women of pleasure; and, above all, we were discussing the absolute absence of the unexpected and novel in modern love affairs — gallantry having its rates regulated and debated in advance like a supplier’s invoice.

“I make do with my models, that just shows how bad it has become,” concluded Inotey, in between two bars of a waltz wafting in snatches from the foyer, where a band of dandies was dancing the Boston to the swells of the Broustet Orchestra. “After the sitting, when the mood takes me, I push the girl onto a divan in a corner of the studio . . . then I pay her double for the pose. At least they are shapely, and almost healthy too. I know what I’m getting. Yes, they have beautiful bodies, the hussies, but often hideous faces . . . oh, well!”

And this “oh, well!” summed up my own impression so well, the standard, mournful resignation of the artist in the year 1890, living in a vague approximation of life, a vague approximation of beauty, and a vague approximation of love, that I did not bother to answer. A great silence fell between us, a silence interrupted only by dance tunes and the resounding tones of brass instruments; and, our faces downcast



beneath the opera hats pushed back on our foreheads, we had once again set to teasing the exaggerated points of our flat-heeled evening shoes with the ends of our canes, offering the public the joyful sight of "two men bored to death," when Inotey leapt up, threaded brusquely past the boxes to the right, and disappeared into the crowd. I had risen too, and, putting my hat straight on my head, I made it my duty to follow him. Suddenly, an arm slipped through mine, and "Here I am, come this way, follow me," murmured Inotey's voice. It was Inotey himself who, suddenly and mysteriously reappearing at my side from who knows where, was taking me in the direction of the boxes on the right, into the corridor where I had just seen him disappear that very moment.

"Oh, really! What is up with you? Will you explain all this to me?"

"Presently."

"A woman?"

"Yes, a woman: a woman I thought I recognized who went in there ... I am not sure which one any more, this one or that one."

He was pointing to the series of boxes 30, 32, 34, and 36; we were on the even side: his features were contorted, his eyes were shining, alive and feverish, in his usually phlegmatic, Anglo-Saxon, fresh, pink face, which was very pale now, with his mouth all puckered, he was nervously kneading my arm under the sleeve of my suit, and so energetically as to hurt me.

Never had I seen him like this before.

"A woman ... an affair, then? ... a mistress who ...?"

"That's just it!"

"What?"

"It is a test, I tell you. I will explain that to you later. Let's stay here now, let's pace up and down. Help me watch these doors, for she is going to come out, she is bound to come out."

"Did she see you, then?"

"She ... I hope not ... I could not be sure of anything if she did ... We had our backs turned to the staircase, didn't we? The people coming upstairs could not see us ... Answer me ... come to that, is it even her? I do not know anything yet ... but that walk, that bearing ... oh! I shall get to the bottom of it."

He was speaking to himself as if in a dream, with a veritable talent for monologue I did not know he had.

"Is this woman alone?"

"Yes, alone ... that is to say, with a lady's maid."

"A society woman, then: after an accomplice!"

Inotey made a vague gesture, he did not know: I could infer noth-



ing from his strange preoccupation. All of a sudden, his arm stiffened under mine. The door of one of the boxes we were watching, box 34, had just opened halfway; all the while looking at it out of the corner of his eye, Inotey had brusquely turned his back, and I saw him frantically pull from his pocket a false nose that he fitted to his face, an awful nose with pince-nez and a mustache, one of those monstrous cardboard designs, which render a man unrecognizable by distorting his features.

"Are you going mad?"

He had already turned to face the box, and, silently crushing my hand, he was watching the woman from number 34 venture through the half-open door, as if hesitant to go out.

Shrouded, or rather immured, in a long, ample domino of black satin, the hood of the cappa magna pulled down over her forehead with a thick piece of Chantilly lace drawn up over her nose, mouth, and chin, revealing only the top of her face, she tilted her head, looked to the left, to the right, as if to assure herself of the safety of the corridor, then, suddenly lifting up the train of her skirts in one hand, with the other bearing a great, open fan of black moiré before her eyes, she entered into the crush and, willowy and sinuous despite the stiff material and the restriction of her black disguise, she flew by with dainty steps, clearing a path through all the masks and the mass of black suits, so heavily veiled she was impenetrable and almost invisible, yet making all heads turn, all eyes glitter, and all nostrils flare at the passing of her little feet, shod in black satin, and the amorous promise of her curves, her tapering waist, and her indolent gait.

Inotey had waited until a distance of at least one hundred paces separated her from her box, then, having abruptly joined her, he passed his arm familiarly through hers, talking in her ear and taking perverse delight in strutting like a peacock and disguising his voice; the domino so boldly accosted did not recoil or become shy and alarmed, and, if her attitude toward Inotey's false nose was lacking, oh! yes, absolutely, in enthusiasm, the words that he proffered did not appear to displease her greatly — and then, suddenly freeing herself from Inotey's embrace, she began to run, to flee from him, as if prey to real terror, and my friend Inotey, holding his false cardboard nose on with one hand and attempting to seize the fugitive's cappa magna with the other, began to give serious chase, to such an extent that some groups began to gather around them and I began to think that I would have to intervene.

A circle had formed around them: to a few black suits who were already interposing, "But madam knows me perfectly well," my painter friend replied, with beautiful sang froid, "We are in number 34, we



reserved the box together." Calm and audacious, his hands in his pockets, he was following the domino's steps, who, now trapped between two rows of curious people, could go no further. She was caught up in her train and embarrassed, uneasy with all these eyes trying to identify her, she held her head lower and lower and lower, not uttering a word, while the unbearable Inotey, still with his hands in his pockets, walked alongside her, waddling, simpering and crooning to the tune of that infamous ditty, an awful variation of his own making:

Mademoiselle, listen to me!  
Does it hurt when they cut off your head?  
Mademoiselle, listen to me!  
Does it hurt when you lose your body?

The gaping onlookers, believing it was all a joke, had moved away. "Hullo there! He's tipsy," teased a masked man, and the crowd dispersed, some shrugging their shoulders, others declaring it a good one. Yet the joke continued between the domino and the black suit, an atrocious joke that was turning into a drama; of that there could be no doubt, for, having approached the two actors of the scene, I saw the woman quicken her pace, her back turned on her box, attempting to escape, no matter where, making a beeline, losing her head, reeling and tripping over her skirts with such a pallor spread over what you could make out of her face through her lace, that at every step forward I expected to see the wretched woman fall into a faint.

"Inotey, Inotey!" I tried in vain to intervene, but, still phlegmatic and derisive under his false nose, like a grotesque persecutor, he continued to waddle in the footsteps of the woman, crooning to the same tune:

Mademoiselle, listen to me,  
Was it a nice day at Place de la Roquette  
When Monsieur Deibler, the baker's boy,  
Chipped off a piece of our dear darling?  
If that poor lad, miz, has no body now,  
That's no reason to make that face!  
Others besides him have a head and a trunk  
And ask nothing better than a bit of fun!  
Mademoiselle, listen to me,  
Was it a nice day at Place de la Roquette?  
Mademoiselle, listen to me,  
Does it hurt when you lose your body?



He had backed her into a corner, and the unfortunate woman, half suffocated, utter anguish in her eyes, was still holding her head down low, and hunching her shoulders, trying in vain to shy away, when with a great strangled cry, she collapsed suddenly onto the chest of her persecutor. Inotey finally took off his cardboard nose: "It was you, it was you," she stammered without pausing for breath, and I guessed that she must be smiling underneath her lacy mask with the smile, both grateful and tense, of a woman who has just escaped some dreadful danger.

"And who did you think it was?" murmured Inotey.

"Yes, I was mad . . . Oh! it is so good to have felt afraid . . . once it is all over, but you, here, to find you here?"

"Are you not here yourself?"

"Oh, me!"

"Come, take my arm and calm down."

With one look, Inotey nailed me to the spot; she had taken his arm and, chatting and whispering like two old friends, I watched them plunge into the crowd and enter the buffet circle.

It was obviously an unexpected encounter after a long absence, one of those meetings that spawns reciprocal vows and interminable stories, for I had been pacing up and down the corridor for a good hour, at the end of my patience and tired of waiting, when Inotey tapped me on the shoulder and smiled delightedly: "You are looking old, my poor friend . . . here I am."

"The fact is that you took your time . . . The lady is not hasty, then?"

"Hush!"

"Well, you know, that was a poor joke to play on me."

"Yes, but when you know, when you know . . ."

"Yes, but I don't know anything."

"Hush, not this evening . . . The night is not over yet, we are still right in the midst of the adventure."

"And what about your domino?"

"Oh, I accompanied her back to her box, I delivered her in person into the hands of her maid."

"And are you dining with her?"

"Not I. You, perhaps."

"Me!"

"Or someone else."

"Is she a whore?"

"I do not think so."

"A society woman?"

"I have every reason to believe so."



"Married?"

"That would surprise me."

"Single?"

"Rather."

"And she is a virgin, isn't she?"

"Yes, if Messalina could be a virgin."

"Oh! Come on! You're mocking me, Inotey."

"I? Not in the least... but let's not stay here, if we want to see her again, let's go downstairs to the ballroom."

"To the ballroom?"

"Yes, let's not stop at anything, just like at Nicollet's; and as for you, take tonight as a guiding rule of conduct, the *nihil mirari* of ancient philosophy; no matter what happens, do not be surprised."

"Is she at least pretty, your mysterious swallow?"

"Pretty? She is ravishing, my dear man. Pretty? As pretty as a picture. If it were not for that fact, where would the scandal be... anyway, what does it matter to you?"

It was fated that I would know nothing that night, and yet the enigmatic black domino and I were to find ourselves face to face a few moments later. It was in the ballroom, in the midst of the crush of dances and masks: in one of the corners the crowd had formed a circle around a frenzied quadrille of vagabonds, executed by four people in disguise, including two transvestites! We had taken our place in the circle, sickened and yet amused by the screeching and entrechats of a fat milkmaid with a hairy chest, wriggling and simpering before a superb French guardsman, with a handlebar mustache, his lower belly and legs hugged tightly by barely adequate buckskin breeches; the salaried rabble of public balls, more or less registered with the vice squad, but sometimes entertaining in the cynicism of its frolics. At the touch of a fan brushing against his shoulder, Inotey turned around beside me; the black satin domino, still just as impenetrable as before, was standing behind us; another domino was with her, black too, but less agile and less elegant, her lady's maid. This time, the domino was no longer afraid, her eyes were even laughing into her lace, provocative and impudent: with the end of her fan she indicated the vagabond dressed as a guardsman and her eyes, resting on Inotey's, posed a mute question. Inotey smiled and whispered the truth... doubtless, for the domino uttered a derisive "oh" behind a hasty flurry of her fan: this did not make her any less swift to return the attack, and, this time fixing her eyes on mine, she consulted the impassive Inotey with a look, awaiting his immediate approbation.



"A journalist, I have already told you," replied Inotey.

"Ah!" retaliated the domino, "too dangerous, but, then again... he is only mortal," and she shut her fan with a dry click.

"So what did you come here for?" sniggered Inotey. "The opera is too decent, snobs and simpletons, nothing here for you, my dear."

"Will you take my arm, it is only three o'clock, shall I take you to Elysée-Montmartre?"

"Are you serious?"

"I am always serious."

"What about him?" and her eyes, which had not left me for one moment, indicated me again.

"That is none of your business and, anyway, I have already told you, he's a journalist."

That Inotey, I could have strangled him: I fancied I saw a pout under the lace of the mantilla, a sinewy handshake from Inotey intimated the order not to follow him, however much I may have wanted to; curiosity and the hope of learning everything the next day from his own mouth made me enter into the spirit of this new role. I stood motionless on the spot; the strange domino took Inotey's arm, threw me a brief nod in passing, then, followed by her lady's maid, she plunged with her partner into the crowd. The quadrille had just finished, there was a bustle of masks in the room, I lost sight of them almost immediately; on the dais, the orchestra was starting up a mazurka. Carried along by some whim, perhaps in order to escape my obsession with this affair that haunted me like a nightmare, I decided on a woman and began to dance the mazurka in waltz time; I cannot remember anything more about that night.

## II

The next day at around noon, Inotey came to see me: "At last!" I cried, crossing my arms, "am I going to know the real story behind this whole intrigue? Admit that you have an absolute nerve. Well, then," I uttered, guiding him toward the window, "you are not so disheveled, for a man who has spent the night with Messalina. My compliments, my good fellow."

"I have just come out of the Turkish bath, where I slept for four hours and had a breakfast of a bottle of port and three dozen oysters."

"Oysters and port, a bizarre mixture!"

"Excellent for the bone marrow, my dear man."

"I do not doubt it, because, for a man a Roman empress made love to hardly ten hours ago..."



"Me? what a mistake! look at me, my dear man, I am not a stevedore, nor a gladiator like those who inspire Messalina's imagination." (And, falling into an armchair), "What if I told you that at six o'clock this morning I left her eating supper at the main bar in the Halles with a haughty pimp, who, I might add, she picked up an hour before from among the rabble at the Kolbus ball?"

"Well, I never!"

"It is just as I told you. Pass me the cigarettes. A strange girl, all phosphorus and cantharides, burning with every desire and burning with every vice!"

"And that's the kind of night you saved me from... well, you really are a friend: because, for a moment, I saw it, she wanted me..."

"Good Lord, yes, you have the mustache of a butcher and you had on a dirty shirt, sorry, I mean your shirt front, your late-night dancehall shirt front."

"And you prevented her, it was you who prevented her!"

"As I would still prevent her... you can lead Pasiphae to the bull, but you cannot deliver up a poet to Messalina with a light heart and his friend to Cleopatra."

"Pasiphae, Messalina, and Cleopatra... and Marguerite of Burgundy as well, I suppose?"

"Exactly."

"But, that woman is an encyclopedia."

"Of all vices, ancient and modern, and terribly interesting to leaf through." (He began to poke the fire.) "There is everything in that woman, vamp, lamia, Greek courtesan, barbarous queen, base prostitute, Roman empress, together with something very singular, very gripping, very typical of our fin-de-siècle corruption, very Baudelairean, if I may say so, with a tinge of slightly funereal lust and an almost Christian resignation; she is a subject, a case..."

"For the Salpêtrière, for Bedlam, go on, say it. Yet another neurotic woman."

"Without a doubt, this woman is an invalid, an obsessive, a hysteric... But her case is particular in that she is conscious of her shame and her illness, but passion... and what passion!... has become for her such a physical need (and a veritable physical need accompanied by cravings and spasms, like the ones that accompany hunger and thirst) that..."

"Yes, a nymphomaniac!"

"But a nymphomaniac with a lesion of the brain, with complicated and bizarre appetites, only ever able to satisfy herself in certain social milieus, for, strangely enough, this lustful woman is chaste: after a dis-



solute night like the one she is sleeping off at the moment in I don't know what dreadful rented room at Les Halles, on the chest of that vile procurer, she will suddenly be stricken with a remarkable sense of modesty: disgusted, afraid of herself, she falls into periods of sexual abstinence lasting three or four months; her past horrifies her, and then, one fine day, the desperate need suddenly enflames her again, and, like a hunted animal, she begins to prowl and wander, sniffing out shady affairs: her vice takes hold of her again, but she still refrains until the moment when, gnawed by some hideous caprice, she comes aground, like a mournful wreck ruined by lust, in the midst of her own banal, perfidious pollution."

"What beautiful prose! and this fascinating neurotic is called..."

"Oh! It would be very difficult for me to tell you that, and for the most noble reasons... What if I admitted that I saw her that night for only the third time in my life, and that I only spoke to her for the second time yesterday? Is she a society woman, as I believe? I don't even know that myself. Well, she is nothing like a kept woman, and anyway, if she were intimately or distantly connected to the world of pleasure, I would have some information on her: in that world a beauty such as hers (for she is indeed charming) would not pass unnoticed. She must be rich, she pays generously for fancies that last just one hour... or one night, but above all, she is passionate and bold, even blindly so; for it is more than her reputation, even her own life, that she risks daily in these sinister affairs; danger attracts her and, even worse, intoxicates her, and she loves danger with the same wild and furious love with which she appears to love to pursue Death... She is something of a heroine and something of a vamp... Poor woman! As far as I can see, she is destined to end up one day in a pool of blood, that blood that makes the soft, puckered skin of her lips swell and blossom in a moist, eternal blush; anyway," he uttered, breaking off at the sight of my smile, "even if I were to debate the enigma of her temperament for hours, I would not be able to convince you further. The facts will speak better for themselves, and when I tell you how I made this woman's acquaintance, perhaps you will finally spare me your skeptical pouts and your knowing airs."

"Right, I am listening," I replied, sinking into my armchair. "But allow me to light my cigar. There, it is done."

Then Inotey: "Do you remember Lebarroil... the wrestler, the one who posed for me as an athlete in the foreground of my painting three years ago, my *Booth from Marseilles at the Fête du Trône*, a boy of medium size, stocky, rather low on his legs, but with superb pectoral and arm



muscles, thick lips, a flattened nose, the face of a white negro, the ugliness of a sensual, expressive brute! And extremely funny at that, all the wit of Parisian filth sprinkled with slang! And what slang!

"Long after I had finished, exhibited, and sold the painting, he began to frequent my studio, to lounge around, or loaf about as he called it, rolling cigarettes... He used to lift weights in one of the corners, fence with my foils against the wall, and I let him be, the boy amused me. In the meantime, he told me some indescribable stories: his first mistress had left him, the second one was at Saint-Lazare, a third was making eyes at him; for all that, he was the best young man in the world and the worst rascal on earth, half acrobat, half pimp, light fingered when necessary, changing residences as often as he changed mistresses, now in Grenelle, now in La Villette, following the itinerary of the Parisian fairs and the whims of his passions. I knew this, and he never bothered to hide it either, but I had nothing to complain about, I never noticed anything disappear, not so much as a Havana cigar, on any of his frequent visits to the Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs. So I welcomed him, and never a week went by when I did not see my lad 'show up' in worn-out shoes, a large butcher's smock over his striped leotard, and there on the threshold, kneading his hat in one hand, scratching the top of his head with the other, he would utter almost timidly: 'It's Auguste. Am I disturbing you?... We could have a smoke and a chat in Monsieur's studio!' I shrugged my shoulders, so he came in. It was my only vice, what more do you want.

"So, last winter I was only vaguely surprised, but very unpleasantly so when I received a letter from this Auguste, postmarked Mazas. My Lebarroil had got himself caught: I shall spare you the style and the spelling of the note; the long and the short of it was that he had been arrested, locked up (unjustly, of course), and he was calling on me in the name of our good friendship (so-called) to go immediately, whatever the cost, and find him in his cell and help him to establish his innocence. Only I could save him, otherwise it would be the Nouvelle, if not the Abbey, for him (the Abbey of Monte à Regret, the scaffold, the guillotine).

"This annoyed me greatly, given my name and my seminotoriety as an artist; it seemed a bit much to have to go and admit in the middle of a police office that I was intimate with a thief, maybe even a murderer. Luckily, I had a few contacts in the place, Oscar Méténier (I can name him, Oscar Méténier, personal secretary to Monsieur Taylor and one of the notable people of the Free Theater, author of *Flesh*, *In the Family*, and *The Power of the Shadows*, that most curious interpretation



of Tolstoy). I went to find him at police headquarters and, thanks to his renowned kindness, two hours later, I was introduced into cell number 103 in Mazas.

"The case of my friend Auguste was a fine one: he was only accused of complicity in the murder of an old woman! An unfortunate produce hawker found with her throat slit, massacred on the night of the fourth of February in an apartment on the Rue Croix-Nivert. The poor wretch was carried to the Necker Hospital in a dire state and was unable to survive her wounds.

"The murderers had as yet escaped the searches of the police, that is, all except my Lebarroil, who was arrested the very next day in a furnished apartment in the Rue du Vertbois, near Les Halles, and found in possession of two one-hundred-franc notes and fifty francs of gold, overwhelming presumptive evidence; since three hundred francs was the exact sum stolen from the victim, all her worldly wealth. They had not, it is true, found any traces of blood on his suit or his linen, but when questioned he had not been able to account for his whereabouts on the night of the crime or the source of this money, his savings from his wrestling, he claimed, yet, the day before the murder they were still refusing him credit in a dairy on the Rue Cambronne for a debt of fifteen francs, a debt he settled the very next day. Finally his mistress, a prostitute registered at the Rue d'Aboukir, far from clearing him of blame, had charged him with extreme violence, alleging that not only had she not seen him that night but that he had been sleeping out for a month and he certainly must have been involved in a nasty piece of work, because she had not given him a penny for a month.

"He denied it: yet as far as everybody, the police, and I myself were concerned, my Lebarroil was guilty.

"To think of the cry with which he welcomed me: 'It's you, it's you, Monsieur Inotey, so there is a god! Oh! I knew you would not abandon me.'

"He had tried to seize my hands, but seeing that I was gently pushing him away and persisting in withdrawing my hand from his:

"'Oh! you too, you think I am guilty of knifing a poor old woman! I, who have an old mother too! My arm would have withered rather than do such a thing! Oh! Monsieur Inotey, you break my heart.'

"He had fallen back onto his cell bench, and, with his face buried in his big gnarled hands, he was choking as if shaken with real pain.

"I had sat down next to him (Méténier had allowed us to be left alone), and, placing my hand on his shoulder, I uttered in a firm voice, 'Lebarroil, tell me, what were you doing on the night of the fourth?'



"No answer, just silent sobbing.

"I repeated my question twice, and left a pause each time for him to take hold of himself, then, in the face of this show of obstinate silence, I rose to leave.

"If I told you,' he cried in a heartrending tone, 'you wouldn't believe me, you nor the others!'

"Speak then, Lebarroil. Look, I am waiting.'

"Well! on the night of the fourth, I was bedded down with a tart, of course!'

"Was it your mistress, Irma Frodin?'

"I was curious to see whether he would lie.

"I ditched Irma a long time ago, the bitch, she must have coughed up a lot on my account, a tart like there never was. No, someone else.'

"Someone else? Where?'

"Where? at the Copper Plate, Rue du Commerce, a filthy hotel where you can stay the night and the manager acts as though he hadn't seen you, with a small cafe downstairs and the passageway opening onto the street, she had her key in her pocket, we went in at ten o'clock, and cleared out at noon... If only the innkeeper had seen us, your number's up, my poor Auguste.'

"So many precautionary measures to refute the evidence, that was a bad sign.

"And the two hundred and fifty francs found on you, Lebarroil?'

"She coughed it up, of course!'

"Two hundred and fifty francs for one night, you are in with the right people, Auguste.'

"Three real notes, yes, the three hundred francs she lent me that morning, the darling.'

"Exactly the sum stolen from the trader in the Rue Croix-Nivert; you haven't got a chance, Lebarroil.'

"But, on my word of honor, it's true!'

"And the name of this woman, this tart, as you say?'

"Her name! The trickster, if I knew that, would I be here?'

"Don't you know the name of this woman?'

"No more than I know her station or her address.'

"And you want me to believe that a girl in the Rue du Commerce... You have some nerve, Lebarroil.'

"I told you that you wouldn't believe me! Oh! I'm a condemned man; condemned, poor fellow, and a poor old mother back home!' and with the back of his hand he wiped away a tear.

"It will not be said,' I reasoned to myself, 'that I entered this man's



cell for nothing.' 'Look, Lebarroil,' I replied out loud, 'think of your own mother, whom your sentence will grieve, dishonor, even kill; a mistress, especially a mistress in a furnished hotel, can be compromising. What was the name, the name of this woman?'

"If only I knew! But I don't!"

"It was not the first time you saw her, though?"

"No, we've been together for a month now."

"A month, so you saw her every day?"

"No, twice a week, sometimes in one hotel, sometimes in another, never in the same place twice; oh! she's a sly one, she was wary. Otherwise, why would she not give me her name and address?"

"So, she's not a whore," I burst out, carried away in spite of myself by the strangeness of this affair!

"Oh, if she is, she's a classy one . . . because she was well dressed, with perfumed, neat underclothes, oh! as I've seen before," he said with a proud wink. "That sort of affair happens more often than you think, to us . . . wrestlers and acrobats . . . generous too, two or three gold louis a time."

"And you do not even know where she lives, you have never been tempted to follow her, to know . . ."

"Most likely, she wouldn't have come back! I don't like blackmail. But I don't kill the chicken while it's still in the egg. In my line of business, we come across those women, the passionate ones, as we call them, oh! we meet them, alright! They only like louts, leotards, biceps, us men, rascals . . . and the more classy, neat, and proud in their bearing and dress they are, the more they're hot and carressing in the sack; I'm telling you, real tarts! Oh! we don't take long to pick them out, they stand at the fairs watching the wrestling bouts, they gather round the shows in the open air, on the pavement, they come and go, they prowl and they act as if nothing was happening, but one glance out of the corner of your eye and they're enticed, that's it . . . one blink, one smile . . . Understood. You draw away from the crowd a little, you meet in a corner, at a wine merchant's or behind a stall, you arrange a date . . . and there you are. It's a godsend for us of one hundred shillings, ten francs, a gold louis or even four gold louis, all that depends on their fancy and their purse; the little perks of the job. Oh! it's not the first time!"

"And this woman of the night of the fourth, the latest one?" I interrupted, interested.

"Oh, that one picked me up like that a month ago, near the Arc de Triomphe, one day last month when I was posing in my leotard with Robin and the fellow from Lyons at the entrance to the Avenue de la



Grande-Armée, in the Place de l'Etoile, it was pretty quick, a date that very night at the Place de la Bastille . . . That night we slept in a furnished room in the Faubourg Antoine, and she was a smashing tart, Monsieur Inotey, like you rarely see, even in carriages; satin skin and two eyes so confounded that they warmed me to the bones. And passionate too, I could have eaten her up; what great nights we spent there, Monsieur Inotey, true, it was almost worth the guillotine, if I were not an honest man deep down and if I didn't have an old mother of my own down in Menilmontant, Rue du Chemin-Vert.'

"Was she generous?'

"Generous! I've told you . . . two, three, four louis each time!'

"And three hundred francs the last time,' and I could not suppress a smile.

"I give you my word, it's as I've said. She piped up that she was leaving Paris . . . as she lived in the provinces . . . because, you see, in bed, in certain ways, I saw that she didn't act like a hussy, she couldn't have been a Parisian. "Here you are," she said. "Here's three hundred francs; when I come back, dress up smart so that we can go and dine somewhere and then spend the evening together; here's three hundred francs for your week, two hundred francs for your clothes and, above all," she added, and it's sad to think of it, "don't go murdering anybody, Auguste," and that's the honest truth, Monsieur Inotey, as I tell it.'

"And she left without leaving an address; you really have no luck, my poor Lebarroil.'

"And I rose. I decided I had heard enough of this; the wrestler made no mistake about the meaning of my leaving.

"You don't believe me, you don't believe me, not you as well?'

"He began grabbing handfuls of his rough, tousled hair and was shaking his head frantically.

"Tell me the way to find this woman. Then I will believe you, Lebarroil.'

"And I made my way toward the door.

"Where to find her! Where to find her! Here . . . Listen, there is a way, but would you do this for me? You alone can do it, because, dammit, I wouldn't let those in the vice squad in on it, for anything in the world, not even for three hundred francs . . . But I don't want you to think that I am a mugger knocking off old women . . . Here, listen carefully.

"The tart . . . I have a meeting with her tomorrow, tonight she comes back to Paris. Will you go in my place? I'll tell you how you'll recognize her, but keep it to yourself, won't you? Not a word to the blue-



bottles in the office, you'll go in my place, you'll face her straight, and you'll tell her what's happening, the real truth, dammit! that she's the only one who can get me out of this one. She only has to come and spill it to the judge, or the superintendent. But will she want to, sly as she is? In any case, Monsieur Inotey, don't force her, explain it all to her, but don't force her... if she doesn't want to... well, Auguste will get by; that woman's secret is her own, and I wouldn't want any harm to come to her on account of me.'

"I had seized Lebarroil's hand. 'And where is this rendezvous?'

"'Tomorrow evening between seven and eight we were to dine together, on the corner of the Avenue Bosquet, near the Alma Bridge, at the Alma Bridge - Bastille omnibus station; oh, you will recognize her easily, always dressed in black, very simply, but elegantly, thin with a handsome bosom, the waist of a great actress in the theater, a pretty, very pale face with great peepers, so her face seems to be just two blazing, gentle eyes... and then you will recognize her by her attitude, the look of a woman waiting, and by her mouth, of course.' And he suddenly struck his forehead, 'She has a mouth like nobody else I know, her lips are red, as red as blood.'"

"Was this the woman we saw yesterday?"

"Yes, the domino from last night, my mysterious stranger; but," Inotey uttered, looking at his watch, "time presses on, let's cut this short.

"The next day, around half past seven, I had my hackney carriage stop a little before we reached the Alma Bridge station and, once there, I did not need to look long to recognize the woman who had been described to me the previous day, standing on the threshold of the omnibus office, ready to open her umbrella to shelter herself from the driving rain.

"Instead of her strange black eyes and the bloodstain of her mouth, her preoccupied air was enough to draw her to my attention. I entered into the office and, standing behind her: 'Madame,' I murmured very quietly, but very distinctly, in her ear. 'Auguste Lebarroil, the wrestler from the Place de l'Etoile, cannot come to the rendezvous you arranged with him here this evening.' She had turned around with inexpressible dread in every feature. 'Monsieur, I do not understand... do not,' she was going to stammer but, failing, her eyes staring desperately into mine, she made to leave. It was her.

"I pushed her gently outside.

"'Madame,' I continued, walking this time by her side. 'Auguste Lebarroil has been in a cell in Mazas for over a week; he is accused of



the theft and murder of an old woman who was found with her throat slit on the morning of the fifth of February, in a furnished apartment in the Rue Croix-Nivert, the crime is said to have taken place on the night of the fourth. Auguste Lebarroil spent that night at the Copper Plate Hotel, Rue du Commerce, with a person whom you know, Madame: the worst charge laid against Lebarroil is a sum of two hundred and fifty francs found on him the day he was arrested, the day after the crime. This sum, Madame, do you know who gave it to him? Only your statement can save this man, he may be sentenced to hard labor, if not to the guillotine; it's up to you to decide, Madame; I am at your service.'

"But, Monsieur, I do not . . . know, I cannot . . .'

"Please note, Madame, that I do not know who you are, and that does not concern me. Here is my card. Lebarroil posed for me as a model; when he was arrested, mine was the only name he could give as a reference; I ran immediately to his aid. I came to find you here, and I could only find you here as a result of his indications and his plea. Only you can establish an alibi and explain where the sum that was seized on him came from: without your statement (Lebarroil and I do not know who you are), neither does the superintendent nor the court believe the truth; as far as they are all concerned, Lebarroil is guilty, he will be sentenced. Even a streetwalker would save her lover; you see, Madame, what you have to do . . .'

"So, what did he tell you?'

"Everything.'

"The wretch!'

"And what does that matter, Madame! as we do not know who you are, and I give you my word as a man of honor that I do not care to know it; I am performing a duty, that is all.'

"Do you really despise me then, Monsieur?'

"Up until now, I have only felt great pity for you, Madame.'

"Oh!' and her pale skin turned pink. 'And what must be done to save the boy?'

"Get into this hackney carriage that will take us to the police headquarters, follow me into the chief superintendent's office, and make your deposition.'

"And give my name and address?'

"Oh, that is more than likely, I cannot hide that from you.'

"Oh! not that. Never. That is impossible, impossible, impossible.'

"She was walking in the rain, convulsively chewing on her handkerchief, staring through her tears; I had taken the handle of the umbrella



and it was I who was sheltering her now! Oh! that walk to and fro in the darkness of the deserted platform, in that icy February downpour, could almost have been called romantic, if not amorous, were a man's life not virtually hanging in the balance.

"'But it would be the ruin of me,' she uttered, stopping short. 'You will be the ruin of me, Monsieur, you will be the ruin of me!'

"'Well! Let's have no more of that, Madame, it is the boy who will be ruined.'

"She shuddered, piercing me with a sinister look, then, in a hoarse voice:

"'Let's go, Monsieur, where is your carriage? Let's leave, but pray, do it quickly, I am right behind you.'

"I took a seat next to her and closed the carriage door: not a single word was uttered during the journey. At police headquarters, Méténier, whom I had informed during the day, wanted to see us in his office right away; once inside, my lady friend warmed her feet without unclenching her teeth; ten minutes later she was asked to go upstairs and make her statement to the chief superintendent. She had lowered her veil as soon as we entered, but before leaving, she lifted it and, preceding me through the door, she exclaimed with a brief wave:

"'You are a man of honor, or so you told me, Monsieur. Promise never to try to find out who I am or to meet me.'

"I bowed. That was all: the train of her coarse-grained silk dress, which she now let fall into great folds, undulated with the slithering of a snake through the half-open doorway, I was never to see her again.

"The next day, Lebarroil was set free and came running directly to me at the studio: from the threshold, I declared coldly that I was breaking off all relations with a man who was so dearly loved by women, I made it known to the porter that he was not to allow him upstairs, and I finally rid myself of this nightmare."

"Better late than never... And the woman? Up until now you have made her out to be a hysteric, a hysteric who is quite conscious and quite wise and crafty in her foolishness... but nothing more."

"The woman... Méténier, whom I met a few days later, accosted me with a singular smile. 'Forcing her to have her lover released, you must really have vexed that woman with the red lips,' and as I exclaimed: 'Yes, do tell me about "the woman with the red lips"'; he continued, 'she is entered under that name in our police records; well-known by our constables and... she really makes our life difficult because we protect her; she has a rare instinct, that woman. What a constable she would have made, she has a sixth sense and a nose for crime...'



"Entered in your records, so she is a...'

"Did you not give your word as a man of honor in front of me never to try to meet her or find out who she is? Hers is an especially curious pathological case; good evening.' And Méténier left me with the smug and annoying grin of a man who knows something, but does not want to say what it is."

"How mystifying!"

"Wait. One month later, yes, on the eighth, the night of the third Thursday in Lent, when the tragedy of the Rue Montaigne occurred, the triple murder of Marie Regnault and the Gremeret women: I will not dwell on the crime, people have talked enough about it. For five months, Paris lived off Pranzini's performances and the letters of his society women. This show of horrors, so smugly detailed in all the newspapers and all the kiosks, left even me cold: I did not even go and hear that wretch's sentence during the celebrated assizes, and his execution, postponed from day to day, did not attract me either. I was, however, in Paris at that very moment, I was in Paris for a week, commuting each night to the Place de la Roquette and all that week disappointed by the wait each morning; even the boulevard was beginning to grow impatient at the endless deferrals: it was then that I met Méténier by the Tortoni, and, echoing public opinion, I said:

"Well then, will you never finish with this wretch? The press has had enough, you know, of singing for Pranzini's head all week: Monsieur Deibler cannot make up his mind, then! You cannot disturb people for nothing for a whole blessed week. You'll be shouted out of business!"

"Méténier had stopped, smiling.

"So, you just happen to be in the neighborhood? I am sorry, my friend, you have my deepest sympathy. Poor Inotey, who stayed the night for nothing!"

"I! You are mistaken, my dear man; I have no need to go and see these macabre little festivities, ordinary burials are sufficient for me."

"Oh! you're quite wrong,' smiled Méténier with his kindest smile, a very odd smile. 'You would have found yourself in quite familiar company. What about number 4, Rue de la Folie-Regnault, among others? There is a good view from there, a restaurant on the ground floor, lounges on the second floor; you can dine there, it is very good; go on, you can tell me what you discover.'

"Are you being serious?"

"Deadly serious; go on, I can assure you that it will be tonight."

"And that is how; my dear friend, I went to see Pranzini executed on the twenty-third of August; at the Place de la Petite-Roquette, an



execution at which I was to meet you . . . So, there is no point in going on. As far as number 4, Rue de la Folie-Regnault is concerned, it was a bar at the city gates, packed downstairs with reporters and minor journalists, on the second floor were girls from Peter's and Sylvain's who had come in a group from the boulevard and were squeezing into the window recesses: champagne, cold meats, shouting, laughter, fisticuffs dealt out willy-nilly; 'Hey, Inotey!' here, and 'Hey, Inotey!' there, everything of the most banal and the least contemplative sort before the great tragedy of death. Sickened, I went outside onto the pavement, giving up all hope of even glimpsing something in the gaps between the heads, when there was a movement in the crowd, jostling me into the street; I protested and rose my voice and my cane: two women were trying to edge their way into the wine merchant's, chatting excitedly; people were pushing and elbowing instead of letting them pass: 'She was the mistress of the condemned man,' they whispered all around me. — 'Madame Sabatier?' — 'No, the other one, the society woman.'

"Intrigued, I advanced too. It was too late. The woman had finally reached her goal. I arrived just in time to see the black undulations of her dress snake away and disappear.

"'Who is that woman?' I asked, catching sight of Adnie, the journalist.

"'Oh, the lady in black, the lady who paid five louis for a place at a window . . . the innkeeper is making a tidy profit there. A woman who has been coming every morning at the same time for nine days in order to see the little machine working. Her casement is on the first floor, reserved for herself and her companion, no doubt her lady's maid: one hundred francs per day. A front seat at a bargain today for a one-thousand-franc note, that is quite a tidy sum: she must be a Russian princess, the last Russian princess of Monsieur Cherbluiez.'

"'And what do people say about her?'

"'A great deal of nonsense. For some she is the condemned man's mistress, for others, a very close friend of Madame de Montille; as for me, I think she is just curious, immensely bored and in search of some new thrill, a different sensation, worshiping the guillotine through idleness, depravity, whatever . . . Do you want to see her? I have my opera glasses here. If we step back a little . . . I know the right window.'

"But you try moving in such a crowd. We managed to break through, jostled and cursed at every effort, but not far enough onto the square to be able to glimpse the window, and when I tried to retrace my steps, curious to catch sight of the immensely bored lady when she came out, it was impossible to move, hemmed in as we were by the crowd and, three quarters of an hour later, the condemned man's shaven head hav-



ing fallen into the basket of bran, I returned to the wine merchant's on the Rue de la Folie, and the lady who had paid fifty louis was not there, she had left, disappeared . . . and let me tell you, my dear man, that not a moment did I think of Lebarroil's woman, the lady with the red lips and that strange coincidence (how curious we are with our analogies and notions) at the opera, that night, a train of black satin undulating in a certain way on a staircase was enough to suddenly bring to mind the certain exit of a woman from the police headquarters and the certain entrance of a woman at a wine merchant's near the city gates in the pale early light of the morning of an execution! Yes, my dear man, I was there, leaning on the banisters, chatting to you about indifferent things . . . a domino passes, her skirts undulate and rustle in a certain way under her silk cappa magna, and suddenly I see my unknown lady, undulating and furtive, coming out of Monsieur Taylor's secretary's office in order to go upstairs to make a statement at the police headquarters; suddenly the pseudomistress of Pranzini appears slipping, trembling, and fearful, into the ground floor of number four, Rue de la Folie . . . and it was she, my dear man, each time the same woman. My unknown lady used to be, I am sure, Pranzini's mistress. Why not! she was Lebarroil's; the two men are similar, same morals, same background. Anyway, you witnessed, as I did, her distress when I spoke about La Roquette, and then later she almost admitted it. Without giving herself away the lady with the red lips confessed everything to me that night at the Elysée-Montmartre; she spoke in confidence, totally reassured then. Oh! she enlightened me, and the most awful of all her confidences, she did not even mean to say it, but I think I guessed and understood.

"Yes, that well-born woman and (this is where the worst of it begins) this woman who, I am sure, has behind her an honorable family, and, who knows, a husband, some children, yes, this woman is not only the equivocal prowler you meet at night on the corner of shady streets in distant Grenelle, around the abattoirs, in the lowliest quarters of murderous Paris, the Paris of thieves, long-lost Paris, not only is this woman the pretty, virginal silhouette that you are often stupefied to see coming out of a trellised passage, a furnished room in the suburbs, ashamed, a broken Messalina, never sated, *lassa sed non satiata*, hungry for dissolute unions and hasty love affairs, the savage and scrupulous patrician who needs the caresses of a lout seasoned with the kicks and vulgarities of a hoodlum, worse than that, she is the woman who, at the Assize Court, goes to see her lover condemned to death, curious about the impression she will feel in her soul and who, having acquired a taste for sensual delight, then goes to see him executed on the Place de la



Petite-Roquette; the impression of the cleaver after that of the verdict. She is the vamp who, devouring with kisses the head of a man who swoons and gives a death rattle in her arms, is intoxicated at the thought that one day or other the steel of the guillotine will cut into that head; she is the one who, in order to love a future assassin, a future client of Monsieur Deibler, in all security, goes to seek her lovers in the vile dives of Saint Ouen, at the wrestlers' stall, in the bars and the lairs, she who depraves her one-night he-men by raining bank notes on them and tells them at dawn when she leaves them: 'Above all, don't go murdering anybody, Auguste,' with the secret wish in her heart that they will do just that within a few days. The lady with the red lips knows where she will see them again, at the Place de la Roquette, opposite the first-rate window; she is the little sister of the poor people of the eleventh hour, the one who waits from a distance for the last look of the condemned men and consoles them with her red smile: her kisses have the taste of blood, hence the scarlet color of her lips.

"If she could, I am sure she would go, as the Princess of Valois did long ago for the Lord de la Mole, and pull the bloodless and petrified heads of her executed lovers out of the clotted bran of the basket and kiss them long on the lips, their tortured lips already cold and blue. The Marquis de Sade cultivated the voluptuous pleasure of Suffering, the lady with the red lips extols the glory of Death. She is the lady of firm intentions who seasons love with the torments of danger, that fiery spice, and with the anguish of the guillotine, that bitter cantharide; she is the imbibor of death pains who depraves, corrupts, and morally destroys and will end up assassinated herself one day . . . The poor creature . . . And to think that there is, I swear, a small town in the center or the west of France, where this woman is an honest woman of the provinces, attending churches and living with her family!"

Originally published as "Inconnue," in *Sonyeuse: Soirs de province, soirs de Paris* (1891).

## ONE SNOWY NIGHT

*For Maurice Talmeyr*

WE HAD COME in to hear Father Monsabré at Notre Dame.

The sermon had just finished, and with a clattering of benches and falling chairs the congregation rose; in the confused murmur of whispering and asides already less restrained, the sound of feet clamored



toward the doors, the hubbub of an army on the move.

Outside, the voices of the peddlers grown hoarse advertising the evening's sermon had fallen silent; their fierce patter (buy "Chastity," buy "Celibacy," Father Monsabré's latest lecture) and their shameless ostentation — cheapjack merchants selling paradise — had suddenly dwindled into stillness in the quilted warmth of the snowflakes falling in front of the cathedral.

In the now nearly empty nave, under the golden curl of the chancel's lamp, tall, black shadows were slowly melting away; archpriests and canons, slumped in some solitary meditation only moments before were now calmly heading homeward; a rising tide of darkness seemed to bathe the paleness of the pillars, a mysterious invasion of shadows further intensified by the sudden gleam of amethysts and opals sparkling high up in a corner of the vaulted ceiling, a brief reflection of stained glass suddenly lit by a ray of moonlight penetrating into the gloom; outside it was cold, snow was falling, the Seine ferried silt-laden lumps of ice along the deserted embankments, and the square outside Notre Dame was sprinkled with hail.

What could that indistinct figure, woman or priest, slumped before the chancel by the railings ornamented with lilies, be doing in this church at this hour, in the great silence and calm, always a little terrifying, of abandoned holy places at night? The same curiosity held us both there. At the sound of the sacristan scurrying through the side aisles and beginning to close the door, the kneeling form rose: it was a woman, and what a woman! Gathering up her threadbare skirts, all spattered with mud, she stared straight ahead, a prayer hanging on her trembling lips, and walked past without seeing us; the same pity took hold of our hearts. Still young, but how withered! This girl reeked of vice and poverty, and yet under her thin, pretentious, faded silk dress, her streetwalker's stole of tattered squirrel fur, and her lamentable hat decked with flowers, such supreme distress, such desperate resignation transfigured those poor, hooded eyes and the whole of that thin face that we nudged each other instinctively and decided to follow her, wanting to know more.

She had already slipped through the half-open inner door of the vestibule, and now, with the yellow fur of her muff pressed against her mouth, she slipped through the snowflakes, all black against the crunchy, velvety whiteness of the square, passing over the Notre Dame bridge, and there, beneath the eternal battle of the storm clouds, lit up by the winter moon, she stopped for a moment, leaning on the parapet, watching the water flow; then swiftly she set off again, a wild, broken



silhouette, only to evaporate, vanish at the entrance to the Rue de la Huchette, that hotbed of prostitution and crime, a veritable thieves' den of the reprobates of modern love.

"Some whore from the Place Maubert," Alexis Sternef, the usual companion of my nocturnal peregrinations, whispered to me. "We shall probably catch up with her at the Château Rouge or old Lunette's, but I think we ought to go down the Rue du Pavé. The Rue de la Huchette is bad at this time of night, with its long high-walled passage, strangled between Saint Jacques-le-Pauvre and the flophouse."

"Are you afraid? There are two of us, and I know the Place Maub well. I used to mingle here with the local big fish, and I can speak slang like a pimp."

"But what if we are murdered . . . a knife in your throat won't get you anywhere!"

"But there is no other way of finding her. Come on, this girl intrigues me, I think I have seen her face somewhere before."

And we stepped into the suspect street. Dark and deserted at first, with the sinister and dangerous solitude of back alleys, it was soon swarming with prostitutes and flat-capped bullies in front of dubious wine merchants' windows; here and there you heard a "psst, psst, I have a nice warm fire inside" soliciting you from the wooden gate of questionable apartments; white shirts and camisoles brushed past and then the alley died out, it faded back into darkness, suspicious, empty, elusive in the light of a flickering lantern hanging on a pulley, and above it the soft, light, and silent snowflakes, falling, falling still.

No sign of the girl we had caught sight of earlier; then, suddenly, a noise of footsteps crunching on the hail and in the same instant we were overtaken by two men running like the wind — "Damn, I think she's had about as much as she can take." — "Oh! I gave it to her good . . . So Madame has developed a taste for priests, has she, and she thinks she can skip out on her job? She made me lose two louis tonight. So I got tough with her; I'll give her mass! The customer is at the Château, you say, let's hope he hasn't taken off. Goodnight, Dodolphe." And the two men separated.

"We are going to the Château Rouge," Sternef told me, we had understood each other. From the few words the men had let slip, we had guessed they meant the pious woman of Notre Dame.

When we arrived at the Rue Galande, in front of the notorious tavern, we ran into a hackney coach into which was climbing an exceedingly rich eccentric from the American colony. Wrapped entirely in furs, his bowler pulled down over his eyes, Mr. X was a very well known fig-



ure in the headlines and the boulevards, and at the sight of our two top hats, he flung himself quickly into the cab. A big hoodlum, all velvet waistcoat and blue jacket, his hat fixed firmly on his forehead, was speaking to him with his elbows on the open window of the carriage. "Off you go, sir," he was drawling in his scoundrel's voice. "She's waiting for you at the Colbert Hotel, number 10, on the first floor, there's a nice warm fire there and she won't balk, she's been licked into shape. And anyway, if she puts on airs and graces, my prince only has to say the word and Drien will take care of it. Ah! I had problems changing her mind, Madame was making a fuss, she protested, a coward, dammit! and what's she afraid of, I ask you. My prince doesn't want to hurt her; never mind, I did a lot of running around to get hold of her! That must be worth ten francs, Monsieur." The American's pale hand landed a gold coin in Drien's paw, and the carriage took off with a jolt.

Adrien slipped the half-louis into his watch pocket and, wetting his thumb, slicked his hair forward onto his cheeks, finally showing us his impudent pimp's face.

"Hullo, Adrien," I said, recognizing him.

"Hey, Mr. Jean," replied the rogue, shouldering arms with the suggestion of a military salute, "are we loafin' around this evenin', then?" Then, winking in the direction of the carriage: "One of my clients, a true and a sharp one, do you know him?"

"Of course!"

"Yes, he's one of the upper crust, isn't he? Got some dough. And his name?"

"You're joking, my boy, so that you can blackmail him!"

"And what was your client doing here?"

"What was he doin', people have their little passions, in high society the same as low, especially in high society, and may I introduce you to the supplier in Sir's service."

"Ah! ah! Well, come in with us and have a drink, you can tell us all about it."

"Yes, some good gossip for the gentleman! Sir writes in the papers, Sir is perhaps also with the police? And what about this gentleman?" he added, casting a crooked glance at Sternef—"Go on," I said, putting a hundred-centime coin in his hand. "This gentleman is a friend; take these ten francs for a start. What were you supplying for your client?"

"What I was supplyin'," sniggered Adrien, once he was sitting across from us in the back room of the Château Rouge, between a carafe of cider and a pitcher full of wine. "What was I supplyin'? I was supplyin' him with women, of course!" And at the disappointed look of Sternef,



"You wouldn't want me to supply him with bishops! I supply him with mine, my woman, and that makes me some good money, for only my woman will do what my client wants." And winking and sniggering at Sternef's alarm: "So perhaps you think it's easy to find tarts for Mister André (that's the name he goes under here at Maubert), well, it isn't! Ah, when they didn't know the job he wanted, ah yes, that was alright, we found women, but when it got known, they cleared out, nothin' doin', neither my persuadin' nor my punches. Only the other Thursday, Red nearly beat up Curly for that, she wouldn't go with Mister André, though he pays two louis, even three, but she would rather kill herself than go, the slut . . . They're all cows.

"Now they look out for him in the area: as soon as they hear the signal: *peewit, peewit*, they all clear off, the tarts are so afraid; he comes round, and there's nobody. There's only mine (and I've licked her into shape) who'll still go . . . and then, what do you know? Only this evenin', when she saw him comin' and chattin' with Bibi, she cleared out and *psst psst* she was past the bridges and off to Notre Dame, in the church where she sticks her nose, and if the verger hadn't thrown her out, she'd still be there with the priests and the old fogies, at Notre Dame. And the client growing gray waitin' for her; and me forced to keep him quiet for all that time. So I did her over when she got back. Anyway there she is, and dammit she'd better not let her teeth rattle even for one moment, poor Mélie, just in case he takes his razor out on her throat, oh yes, that's right, I didn't tell you, what this customer's real passion is. It's a funny idea, I'll say, a right rich bastard's notion. Once in the hideaway with the tart, real respectable, he passes a bright, sharp razor blade over and over her neck real nice, for a quarter hour, a half hour, maybe more, 'til the kid gets scared. Then, the more she shivers, petrified, her teeth chatterin', the more he laughs and drinks it in, but inside himself, deep down inside, 'cos he stays as solemn as a judge all this time, with real strange eyes that shake the craftiest minx. Some of them even who go berserk, lose their nerve, and fall down in fits. Then when the woman is all stiff, and she's groanin', nearly out cold, then he shuts his tool, hides it in his pocket, gets up, hands over the dough and goes away . . . And there you have 'em, the passions of the filthy rich; scarin' workers' daughters and proletarian men's wives, and victimizin' the poor; so, when our turn comes, landlords watch out."

"But he's a sadist, an obsessive, a madman," Sternef burst out. "One of these days your three-louis client will press the razor in and cut your woman's throat, and then you'll be in a nasty mess."

"For heaven's sake! Do away with Mélie and have me sent down, me,



Drien of Maub', that mustn't happen. I'd better run, gentlemen, 'specially as he's taking his time this evening, the old client, and Mélie hasn't showed up. I hope my rich bastard hasn't got any mad ideas into his head this evenin'. You've made my blood curdle, upon my word! with your stories; apologies to the company, I'm going, I'm running, it's my daily bread!"

At that, Drien, rather moved, threaded his way through the tables and made for the door. We got to our feet and Sternef paid off the pitcher of wine with this sally: "What a fine tale to dedicate to Brunetière, who's always telling you off for hanging around grog shops."

Originally published as "Un Soir qu'il neigeait," in *Buveurs d'âmes* (1893).



# ***Selections***

by Remy de Gourmont

---

Translated by Rachel Ashton

Introduction

by Jennifer Birkett



# Images of an Egoist: The Politics of Style and Sensibility in the Work of Remy de Gourmont (1858–1915)

by Jennifer Birkett

“Gourmont prepared our era,” declared Ezra Pound, in the lengthy essay “Remy de Gourmont: A Distinction,” in *Instigations* (1920).<sup>1</sup> Best known now for his much-anthologized short stories, collected in *Histoires magiques* (1894) and *D’un pays lointain* (1898), Remy de Gourmont was in his own time recognized by fellow writers (though not by the public at large) as one of the most original and wide-ranging writers and intellectuals of the early years of symbolism.<sup>2</sup> Such novels as *Sixtine, roman de la vie cérébrale* (1890), *Le Fantôme* (1893), *Les Chevaux de Diomède* (1897), and *Une nuit au Luxembourg* (1906) broke new ground in the elaboration of techniques to mount and sustain a delicate world of dream. Historian as well as practitioner of the Symbolist mode, he provided contemporaries with the means to inscribe private fantasy into the larger frame of cultural tradition. His study *Le Latin mystique* (1892), a collection, with commentaries, of the neo-Latin poetry of the early Christian church was welcomed as a sourcebook by writers such as J.-K. Huysmans and Léon Bloy (who, however, also saw in the work uses other than the rhetorical. The atheist Gourmont parted company with the newly declared convert Huysmans, when the latter’s preface for *Le Latin mystique* concluded with an attempt to turn the text into an instrument of Catholic conversion).<sup>3</sup> His essays and studies built for him a reputation as a theorist of language (a unique combination of philologist and aesthetician), of style in general, and of symbolist form in particular: *L’Idéalisme* (1893), *L’Esthétique de la langue française* (1899), *La Culture des idées* (1900), *Le Chemin de velours* (1902), and *Le Problème du style* (1902). The latter sets out two principles that are axiomatic for all Gourmont’s creative and critical work. The first is the primacy of the visual imagination: “‘Style’ means visual memory and metaphoric capacity, combined in variable proportions with emotive memory and all the obscure contribution of the other senses.”<sup>4</sup> The second is the relation of sensibility to artistic style. Gourmont sets up two basic and antithetical categories of artists, those



whose interests are primarily referential and those whose concern is representation. The great artist, for Gourmont, is one who diverts his passions into the production of the aesthetic image, which stands alone by the force of its style:

The artistic writer is hardly ever a sentimental creature, and very rarely a sensitive one: that is, he incorporates all his sensibility into his style, and has very little left over for life and deep passion. [The abstract writer] takes a ready-made sentence or writes an easy phrase, which he thinks — deceived by his own emotion — has emotive value; [the artistic writer], using words like mere handful of clay, constructs the members of his work to raise a statue that, whether beautiful or clumsy, heavy-footed or light-winged, preserves in its attitude something of the life that was in the hands that molded it. The common herd will of course feel more moved by a banal than an original phrase, and that will be the counter-test: the reader who gets his emotion from the substance of what he is reading is to be opposed to the one who only feels what he reads insofar as he can apply it to his own life, his own hopes and disappointments. A reader who enjoys the literary beauty of a Bossuet sermon cannot be touched by it at the religious level, and the reader who cries over Ophelia's death has no aesthetic sense. These two parallel categories of readers and writers are the two major types of cultured humanity. . . . Their animosity runs in two long rivers — on occasion, underground — all the way through literary history.<sup>5</sup>

Member of the founding group of Alfred Vallette's *Mercure de France*, the flagship journal of the 1890s avant-garde that made its first appearance in January 1890, he gradually became a significant commentator on literary reputations and taste, publishing under various pseudonyms in many of the "little magazines" of the period.<sup>6</sup> The essays collected in the two volumes of *The Book of Masks* (1896–98), *Promenades littéraires* (1904–27), *Promenades philosophiques* (1905–1909), bear witness to a wide-ranging mind, ready to recognize individual talent, wherever and whenever it might be found.

Philosopher as well as poet, Gourmont produced accounts of the relationship between style, public morality, and politics, which identified and dismantled the prejudices built into conventional aesthetic judgments and which presented a radical challenge to the concept of art as the property of the bourgeois state (*La Culture des idées* [1900] and *Le Chemin de velours: Nouvelles Dissociations d'idées* [1902]). From the start, his writing articulated the resentment of a rising generation unwilling to lay down their lives in the service of the power games



of older men. The article "Le Joujou patriotisme," published in April 1891 in the *Mercur de France*, shocked the nation with its scorn for revanchism and led to Gourmont's dismissal from his post at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Disseminating the individualism as well as the idealism of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Gourmont sought to defend the originality of the artist against what he saw as the oppressive institutions of mass society and culture. "Art," he wrote in *Le Problème du style* ("Questions de l'Art: L'Art et le peuple"), "is essentially, totally unintelligible to the people. Racine, Mallarmé, Raphael, Claude Monet — the people have no artistic understanding of poems and pictures because the people are not disinterested; and art is disinterestedness itself. . . . The people don't like the exceptional, and art, I maintain, is one long exception."<sup>7</sup>

At least as important as his reputation in France is Gourmont's influence on the symbolist avant-garde in England and the United States. His work was acknowledged and promulgated by Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, T.S. Eliot, and T.E. Hulme, founder of the Imagist movement. The connection to Pound is particularly interesting for the light it casts on two aspects of Gourmont's writing: its sensibility and its politics.

Pound's essay in *Instigations*, cited earlier, praised Gourmont for his recuperation of the sharp intelligence and open-mindedness of eighteenth-century rationalism and of the "sensuous wisdom"<sup>8</sup> of the philosophical mind. At issue here is certainly his anticlericalism, which Pound links to the influence of Voltaire, but also, and more positively, his materialist sensibility, behind which lie the Spinoza and Epicurus invoked in texts such as *Une nuit au Luxembourg*. The understanding of the intimate relation of knowledge and the senses is highlighted by Pound as Gourmont's forte. Gourmont is said to be "intensely aware of the differences of emotional timbre,"<sup>9</sup> the poet of sensibility, "the permanent human elements,"<sup>10</sup> and his writing is described as a stylistic exercise in capturing critically the modulations and variations of emotion. Pound compares him to Henry James, whose work he feels is diminished by its lack of universality. Gourmont, he comments, avoids those aspects of sensibility that pin characters down to a particular era or social class. In this context, Pound praises in particular *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, his favorite among Gourmont's novels. This sophisticated exploration of the stimulating but difficult relationship between the Poet and the New Woman was serialized with Pound's help from September 1913 through March 1914 in *The New Freewoman: An Individualist Review*. Halfway through its publication, in December 1913, Pound



and Aldington took control of the review from its founder-editor Dora Marsden and renamed it *The Egoist* — which perhaps says more about the difficult relationship of the Poet and the New Woman than any fiction ever could.

The extracts Pound quotes from Gourmont's critical essays ("the best portrait available, the best record that is, of the civilized mind from 1885–1915")<sup>11</sup> draw a picture of the political as well as aesthetic affinities between the two. Through the aristocratic Frenchman's rhetoric of liberal eclecticism (his family belonged to the Normandy *noblesse de robe*) pierces a fierce loathing for the republican and democratic spirit, contempt for the conventions of a society constructed on the fudging of differences, and the determination to privilege originality and individualism against the collective. For Pound, Gourmont stands for the selective recuperation, in culture, of elitist tradition, beginning with medieval Latin and troubadour lyric and ending in Schopenhauerian idealism: an ideological process that constructs and promulgates alternative hierarchies more flattering to the poetic ego. Pound's personal trajectory through that elitist cultural tradition into the politics of fascist order has no straightforward foreshadowing in Gourmont's work. In different historical circumstances Gourmont might well have opted for positions on the far right. In *Physique de l'amour*, for example, there are disturbing racist passages and a hysterical concern over the perceived threat posed by feminism to social order. At his death, he was certainly appropriated by the extremists of *L'Action française* (see, for example, Charles Maurras's obituary for Gourmont on September 29, 1915), but what an obituary writer claims is hardly evidence, especially in time of war.<sup>12</sup> Death, perhaps, in 1915, relieved Gourmont of the need to confront the more unpleasant political options spawned by the cultural ideology of the early twentieth century. Pound, thirty years later, was less fortunate.

A different set of reflections on the sensibility represented in Gourmont's writing arises from consideration of his connection with the lesbian poet and prose writer Natalie Clifford Barney. Barney, who arrived in the American colony in Paris in 1898, was the model for the heroine of her lover Liane de Pougy's novel *L'Idylle saphique* (1901), the first lesbian novel to be published openly in France and a corresponding *succès de scandale*. For fifty years beginning in 1909, Barney's salon on the Rue Jacob was an important focus of intellectual activity. Gourmont frequented it from 1910. He published open letters to the woman he termed his "Amazon" in the *Mercure de France* (January 1912–October 1913), and, after his death, Barney published his private



letters to her (*Lettres intimes à l'Amazone*, 1923). The interesting feature of this relationship is the contradiction between Gourmont's real-life admiration and affection for this iconoclastic lesbian New Woman and the hostility expressed throughout his work for women who transgress the traditional gender roles, which is at least as strong as the contempt he metes out for the women who submit to them. It is a contradiction to bear in mind when examining the representation of the feminine offered in Gourmont's fictions.

Gourmont's misogyny is one that is unusually conscious of itself and its status as an ideological construction. His writing presents itself as a construction of male desire, the imaginative embodiment of much more than the instinct for sexual pleasure. What interests him are the aims and values — often inconsistent ones — caught up in the instinctual drive (as in, for example, the evocation in "Stratagems," in the present anthology, of the perverse frisson the lover takes in the simultaneous provocation and denial of sensual satisfaction to himself and to his partner). From the outset, Gourmont's writing offers unusually lucid analyses of the position of women in contemporary male fantasy. Most of the time, women in his work are the focus for real hatreds and resentments. But although the emotions are absolute, their relation to their imaginative focus is ambivalent. Gourmont's description of a psychological reality in which women are invested with meanings by the masculine imagination includes his own particular recognition that this is not an absolute, necessary reality, but one whose assumptions, hierarchies, and figures could be different. His writings about relationships between men and women open up a space between how the exchanges of power in those relationships are conventionally perceived and how they might be seen differently. Fantasy is a playground, where the limits and rules of the different games are more arbitrary than necessary, and might perhaps be susceptible to change, by an option of individual will. Man the Poet could — possibly — relax his imaginative grip on Woman the Poetic Object; he could — perhaps — choose to let whatever it is he now knows in familiar forms present him with something other.

The beginning and end of any account of Gourmont's representation of the feminine must be his commitment to the conventional view of women as objects for exploitation, mirrors of men and the stuff men's dreams are made of. This is the theme of the fictions of the early 1890s. *Lilith* (1892), *Litanies de la Rose* (1892), and *Le Fantôme* (1893) play with the symbolism of Christian myth and ritual to create masochistic and sadistic image sequences, building together the motifs



of mystical desire and perverse sensuality for purposes of mutual illumination. By the end of the decade, Gourmont can write with clarity about the insights to which his writing is leading. A key essay is "La Dissociation des idées," first published in 1899 (collected in *La Culture des idées*), with its celebrated theoretical dissociation of physical sexuality and its pleasures from the repressions of Christian ideology and the seductions of art. But in practice, he argues, modern formations of pleasure simply cannot dissociate sexual pleasure and style. Contemporary sensuality resides in forms and language. In other words, he is aware that the modern body knows itself only *in culture*. Modern sensibility is constructed, its physical responses geared to certain ideas and images. Gourmont seeks to understand the bases of the construction in order to release the (male) imagination from that which within it is repressive, while leaving it free to enjoy those aspects that can still produce the frisson of pleasure. When he is not figuring himself as Poet, his preferred self-image is Satyr: the pagan embodiment of phallic power, repressed or ridiculed by a modern world chained to Christian respectability.

The difference between Gourmont and most of his contemporaries is that alongside his commitment to erotic exploitation of the feminine is his attempt at guilty self-distancing from a process he recognizes as inequitable. He never dreams of abandoning exploitation — the pleasure to be derived from it is too great — but he is fascinated by individual women who resist reduction to mirror status. The leechlike femme fatale is always the dominant stereotype in his fictions: snake, vampire, or octopus, as exemplified in *Lilith*, or the nightmare monsters of *Le Songe d'une femme* (1899). But alternative possibilities are sketched, for example, in the short story "Le Suaire" (*Histoires magiques*, 1894), or the novel *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, in which the logical consequence of Egoism turns out to be a new representation of heterosexual relationships as a heroic conflict of matched equals. Generally, though, the challenge of equality is too much for the male ego. The Poet falls back before his Woman into sadistic resentment or paralysis. Diomède refuses to join with Néobelle in an attempt to make something different and instead maneuvers her into a competitive, imperialistic Egoism that mirrors his own masculine role. This is, unfortunately, no more than a holding operation, and the victor is left riddled with anxiety for the future ("The old team is dissolved. One horse has broken the leading rein.").<sup>13</sup>

Anxiety turns to panic some five years later in *Physique de l'Amour: Essai sur l'instinct sexuel* (1903), which Pound translated and annotated



(admiringly) in 1926 for distribution by the Casanova Society as *The Natural Philosophy of Love*. The tone must be connected to the peaking of militant feminism at the turn of the century, as well as wider issues such as the instabilities in the sociopolitical order exposed by the Dreyfus affair, or the ongoing struggles of colonization. Narrower personal matters must also be invoked, such as a lupus attack in the early 1890s that, although eventually cured, left Gourmont's face permanently disfigured. But it probably has most to do with Gourmont's interest, from 1902, in evolutionist science and the devastating message of the material evidence that the text eventually has to admit, in the horrified chapter "Le Dimorphisme sexuel et le féminisme": "The male is an accident; the female would have been enough."<sup>14</sup> As far as survival of the species goes, nature can and does manage to perpetuate the species with the female alone. What began as an exploration of nature for models of sexual freedom turns into a confrontation with the extent to which Western "civilization" is founded on oppression and exploitation of women and of nonwhite races. The frenzy of Gourmont's response is astounding: a pseudoscientific venting of sexist and racist prejudice, the violent assertion of traditional gender roles, with Nietzschean demands for white men to be allowed to fulfill their destiny and preserve order and civilization.

After this outburst, Gourmont falls into a gentler mode. The aging satyr, afraid of looking ridiculous, stays in the shadows and looks for the quieter fantasies of pleasure that are found in the philosopher's dream (*Une nuit au Luxembourg*). The women in these later texts are unresistingly subordinate. *Une nuit au Luxembourg* politely but firmly spells out their inability to think. The lovely young whore in *Lettres d'un satyre* (1913) teaches the old satyr to write without ever dreaming of writing herself. Gourmont had settled the terms of peaceful co-existence in his 1901 essay "Les Femmes et le langage" (collected in *Le Chemin de velours*), in which he declared that the whole of civilization depended on women, conservers and transmitters of the cultural heritage, of the language skills that permit cultural development, and of the social skills that make life pleasant. But they are, he emphasizes, only transmitters and are incapable of original creativity. "Woman is language, but useful language: her role is not to create but to conserve. She does it brilliantly. She doesn't create poems or statues, but she creates the creators of poems and statues; she teaches them language, which is the condition of their science, lies, which are the condition of their art and the self-awareness that gives them genius."<sup>15</sup> The Natalie Barney to whom the old satyr addresses his last letters is



not a woman but an honorary man, like Néobelle, a warrior-woman who shares his own values: "your wonderful Amazon egoism."<sup>16</sup> With such an exception, he can envisage a relation of creative exchange in which "we are at one and the same time Pygmalion to a statue and statue to Pygmalion."<sup>17</sup> A Natalie Barney leaves the competitive order untouched; there is no prospect with her of the challenge of the collective feminist case being raised.

In the final analysis, the principal difference between Gourmont's work and that of his contemporaries is its almost-aggressive lucidity about the potentiality, even the desirability, of other modes of being that he just as aggressively refuses to see realized. In a conventional Romantic move, he opts to take tragic irony as the ground of the human condition: men see the best and do the worst. This is a subject frozen in Baudelairean remorse, retreated into words, with no intention of ever seeking to recreate an effective link between words and action. For all his protestations of Individualism, this is the body of a subject particularly engendered within the transition from Second Empire to Third Republic, through the scarring collapse of national economic and political power.

The texts collected below, from the 1894 short story anthology *Histoires magiques*, offer a number of different angles of vision onto the modern landscape of desire as Gourmont's imagination constructs it. Pound describes these tales as "all of them special cases, already showing his perception of neurosis, hyperaesthesia."<sup>18</sup> Landscape is indeed one of their focuses of interest: the river where the narrator rows to meet his mistress, the avenue that leads to the fairy-tale castle of remorse, the Paris street where criminals prowl. Movement is the motif. The symbolist stylist follows the beckoning image down the chain of signifiers, stopping where he pleases to explore the fantastic sites of contemporary psychological reality. The liberating moment of this writing is in the writing itself, declaring the freedom of the poet-psychologist who has the skill to invest narrative space with meaning. He brings together three domains: the sensibility of his society; its conventional discourses, the unrecognized fantasies of itself congealed in its language and symbols; and his own discourse, in which those unrecognized fantasies take on clear significance. The poet is free because he can discriminate between the three domains. The reader who looks for him in the *Histoires magiques* will find him in the water birds that haunt the narrative landscapes (swan, sea gull, or grotesque heron), moving freely between the land, water, and air.

The poet's lucidity, like the psychologist's, is defined at the expense



of the others in his narratives. In *Histoires magiques*, modern desire is presented as a morbid pathology, a crazed fetishism that generates a world of nightmare. In the four selections anthologized here, "desire" and "mad" are recurring words. In *Histoires magiques* as a whole the diagnosis is unequivocal. The conventional imagination appears twisted by Judeo-Christian sexual repression ("Pehor"), living a maimed fantasy life ("Danaette") punctuated by brief, disillusioning sexual couplings ("Le Faune"); in sum, an ill-formulated cult of carnal pleasure in which all sense of the individual is dissolved ("Le Secret de Don Juan").

These case studies of modern neurosis are also prose poems, whose pleasure is in the stylishness of a representation that catches precisely the shifting nuances that differentiate an individual sensibility. Baudelaire is certainly an influence in their composition, and any analysis of their dramatic and symbolic structure would certainly refer to the theory and practice of *Les Fleurs du mal* (especially "Correspondances"). Mallarmé is no less a model. What Gourmont appreciated in Mallarmé's brief evocations of mood is also what his own work offers: a poetry of hesitation and suggestion, evoking the bizarre mysteries of dream: "the most wonderful pretext for reverie yet offered to men wearied by so many heavy, futile affirmations: poetry full of doubts, changing nuances, ambiguous perfumes."<sup>19</sup>

The clothes fetishist of "The Dress" (included in this volume), is a brilliant blend of the data gathered by the new science of psychiatry with Gourmont's own imaginative insights. In her study of the decadent fascination with the fetish (*Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France*), Emily Apter provides a useful account of the body of scientific information accumulating in this area in the 1880s, indicating the close connections between the new science and literature, to which the scientists often turned for their course information. Particularly pertinent is Apter's account of Alfred Binet's influential essay, "Le Fetichisme dans l'amour" (1887), illustrated with lengthy quotations from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's description of the values and the preferences engaged in the process of selecting his object, and in dissociating the female body from its ornament, comes close to the requirements set out by Gourmont's hero: "Rousseau confessed that seamstresses, maidservants, and shop girls hardly tempted him; he needed women of class. 'It's not at all the vanity produced by estate or rank that attracts me, it's sensual delight; a better preserved complexion; a finer, better-made dress, a daintier shoe, ribbons, lace, hair better dressed. I would always prefer the less pretty one as long as she had more of all that.'"<sup>20</sup>



But as Apter points out, the fin-de-siècle vogue of the fashion column gave many of the most important writers of the day the opportunity to elaborate their own understanding of the mechanisms of clothing fetishism, and Gourmont, as she reminds us, was like Mallarmé one of its important exponents.<sup>21</sup>

"The Dress" homes in on the fetishist's foregrounding of style, his insistence on the aesthetic, intensified to the point of madness. Gourmont's stylistic skill is demonstrated in his dramatic re-creation of the process by which the fetishist's attention fixes and focuses on his object, dwelling on it obsessively to the point where the signifier fills his whole horizon, evacuating completely the thing signified. At the beginning of the story, this man already inhabits a different discourse from the reader, despite surface appearances of conventionality. As the lover walks down the street in search of his object, Gourmont exploits the gendering of the French pronoun, letting the reader assume that the "*la*" of his desire is a "she," when in fact it is an "it" — the dress, the reader realizes, with a jolt of surprise. This first sharp lesson in the making over of language by individual desire is rapidly followed by others. The fetishist's syntax works not to enjoy but to negate the female body. His images are constructed to reduce the woman to the natural order to which she belongs (she is a shrub, her clothes are blossom, her head a flower) and to diminish her importance. In a second, grotesque image chain she's a bird — a bald parrot, a plucked chicken. The dress, in contrast, grows, described in slow, lingering detail. The lover's fever builds to a pitch of frightening intensity, paradoxically heightened by the abstract nouns to which its description is clinically committed. (In *Le Problème du style*, Gourmont analyzed this mechanism. The writer's failure to be specific in his use of language leaves the reader to fill the space with his own emotions. We could speak here of the decadent writer's invitation to the reader to collude with the construction of the perversion: an interpellation of the reader as fetishist.) Intensity generates irritation, marked in the lover's language as a seeping, marginal penetration of reality's intrusive presence, in the decor (the divan is too big, too crude) and in the prostitute's jarring inability to understand his needs. Finally, the weight of his desire is too much for the dream discourse. Language and the body of the real split apart and both, simultaneously, are lost. The madman penetrates and strangles the prostitute, in a convulsive, frustrated climax, and what's left is Gourmont's precise, objective encapsulation of the heavy, repellent horror of mindless body and bodiless mind: "ignorant of the death of the flesh to which he was about to join his own."



"On the Threshold" (included in this volume), is a figuration of an obsession that skirts dangerously close to Gourmont's own. Certainly, the mood of the narrative, exploring the fetishization of the suffering that comes from the willed refusal of action, is shot through with self-deprecating irony. The aging aristocrat confesses that he has consciously devoted his life to worshiping unrealized desire, shunning all material satisfactions for the delight of cradling his obsession. He lives now in a palace of symbols of, he says, his own choosing. The narrative perspective, passing visitor through this landscape, remains skeptically silent, its discourse having already identified without comment the Gothic fairy-tale antecedents of the ruined castle, with its ivy-strangled fallen tower, the conventional flavor of the moat *à la de Gouve* with its slow black swans, drooping hemlock, and dead sunflowers, and the cliché-ridden gentle beauty who pined and died for the heartless hero. The grotesquely derivative nature of the aristocrat's pose is finally crystalized in the gawky figure of the heron, the old man's chosen symbol of the remorse he now elects to feel — Poe's raven, Baudelaire's albatross, ramshackle from overuse.

But if there is a tale in which Gourmont might prefer to recognize a mirror of his own desire, it is "Eyes of Water" (included in this volume), with its fantastic doubling of the female other that allows the dreamer simultaneous possession of images of satisfied and unsatisfied desire: "Out rowing, I ended up somewhere I had not intended to go" (p. 941). From the two opening sentences, this is a dream of delight. The narrating subject is a figure of complete self-possession, positioned as both masculine and feminine, subject and object of desire, simultaneously active and passive. He rows his boat down the river toward a waiting mistress, himself the object of *her* desire (her desire both phallic and feminine, a swan's neck, sensuously stretching through the flowery weeds); but at any moment, the delightful surprises of indiscriminate, random desire can — and do — descend on him. The serving woman at the inn is an embodiment of the contradictions he desires from women and from life: obedient and controllable but aristocratically conscious of her own distinction; challenging and threatening, but not to him; mysterious, but a mystery that he, uniquely, can penetrate. She represents what all his contemporaries prize. Her eyes, the color of water, are the epitome of decadent desire, the accumulation and condensation in a short one-sentence paragraph of the images that evoke the cold, indeterminate, shifting seductions of death. Gourmont's carefully chosen clichés spark a chain of associations in the (knowing) reader that pulls together reader, writer, and an



unspoken host of other writers in this specialist domain.<sup>22</sup> The greatest delight of decadence, the narrative implies, is that one belongs to a very exclusive club.

The woman's eyes threaten the dissolution that the egoist fears, and her stories of men she has destroyed confirm their power. But she is no threat to him, because this is *his* narrative. She is old and terrified, he can command her speech, and what she tells him is the story he wants to hear: the fearful inherited powers of the female, the dramatic conflict of love and hatred. From the start, he treats her as an equal, inviting her to sit beside him. They seem to share a language, an incantatory, allusive rhetoric, they exchange linguistic tokens, symbols; but he controls it better than she does. As their dialogue develops, he dispossesses the woman of her insistent "I," driving her into a corner where all she can do is confess her madness — and abandon the contest in flight, leaving the narrator with trembling hands (from fear? delight?), almost unable to lift his glass of wine to his lips.

What makes this dream perfect is not just the frisson of ecstatic anticipation, the promise of initiation into mystery, but the assurance that the mystery is genuine. In this idyll, not only does banal reality fail to puncture the fantasy, it actually confirms it. The fatuous innkeeper, with his platitudinous, patronizing tone, reassures the narrator of his superiority to the woman, putting her back in her servant place with his simple version of her story. At the same time, he leaves open the possibility that she might be more than she seems and abandons the whole puzzle as beyond his capacity: "We never knew anything more" (p. 943). The narrator, of course, does. In this beautifully balanced little world, every discourse, of culture, class, and gender, is styled to confirm the superiority of the writing "I."

---

#### NOTES

1. Essay collected in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 339.

2. See Garnet Rees, *Remy de Gourmont: Essai de biographie intellectuelle* (Paris, Bolvin et Cie, 1940), p. 286n. Most of Gourmont's books were slow sellers, with the exception of *Physique de l'amour* and *Une nuit au Luxembourg*.

3. Gourmont's friendship with Huysmans began in 1889. In the course of it, they shared a mistress, Berthe Courrière, who was the model for Gourmont's *Sixtine* and part model for Huysmans's *Madame de Chantelouve* in *Là-bas*.



4. Remy de Gourmont, *Le Problème du style*, 10th ed. (Paris: Mercure de France, n.d.), p. 47.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.
6. See Rees, pp. 98ff.
7. *Le Problème du style*, pp. 193–95.
8. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 341.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
12. Rees, p. 266.
13. Remy de Gourmont, *Les Chevaux de Diomède* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1897), p. 187.
14. Remy de Gourmont, *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, trans. Ezra Pound (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1922), p. 75.
15. Remy de Gourmont, "Les Femmes et le langage," in *Le Chemin de velours: Nouvelles Dissociations d'idées* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1924), p. 200.
16. Remy de Gourmont, *Lettres à l'Amazone* (Paris: Crès et cie, 1914), p. 139.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 133–34.
18. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 345.
19. Remy de Gourmont, "Stéphane Mallarmé et l'idée de décadence," in *La Culture des idées* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1900), p. 128.
20. Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 21.
21. *Ibid.*, "Unmasking the Masquerade."
22. The specialist of specialists in water eyes (sea eyes, glassy eyes, the blue-green gaze, emerald/amythest/aquamarine — the decadence has a string of qualifiers for the unqualifiable, shifting mystery of Death and the Woman) is Jean Lorrain, whose short story "Les Yeux glauques" (*Buveurs d'âmes*, 1893) is worth reading alongside Gourmont's tale. Nelly is obsessed by a legend that the woman who looks into a lover's eyes as he dies will have his soul and with it the gift of eternal youth. She and her lover go boating together and he mysteriously drowns. Much later, the motif of blue-green eyes is central to Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901), linked to the morbid seductions of the painting of Gustave Moreau.







## CONTENTS

EYES OF WATER.....	941
STRATAGEMS.....	943
THE DRESS.....	953
ON THE THRESHOLD.....	956



## EYES OF WATER

OUT ROWING, I ended up somewhere I had not intended to go.

I was heading toward the house that awaited me and toward a creature whose heart was already beating at the distant sound, whose desire beheld me, like a swan with its neck stretched out among the flowering bulrushes — but I was unfaithful.

A pair of eyes stopped me, eyes such as I had never seen before, half blue-green and half violet, aquamarines melting into pale amethysts, cold, alluring eyes, eyes where so many souls must have drowned in the belief that they were falling into the heavens!

Eyes and nothing more, for the palace illuminated by these deceptive torches was just a beautiful and elegant ruin of yesteryear. I could see there still what the hail had spared of the field of flax, a poplar before the last tempest, a slender boat stripped of its rigging and run aground.

A bower and a bench, a momentary rest for the morning rower: I drew alongside and was kindly welcomed, as a guest, not as a godsend. As soon as the woman with eyes of water emerged, I was transfixed by the secret that the cold pupils concealed and I settled down, limiting my journey to this unexpected encounter, forgetting the other woman, she who would not see the reality of the swan.

A spell abstracted me from all previous wishes, a spell so binding and of such a lofty and special magic that I did not even remember having set forth for another goal entirely, and I concluded my journey very loyally under this suburban vine, with a rosé wine.

Eyes of water, and nothing more: a thin, withered, pitted face; a body still supple, but like dried willow. The only thing that captivated me were her noble hands, long and slight, with nails like wax,

... Those pale hands

Which do so much good but are capable of all evil, hands skilled in  
caresses and crimes!



But the hands of this woman were merely the consequence of her eyes — for there is a necessary harmony between the organ that touches directly and that which touches at a distance — and her eyes devoured my attention, like a hungry, jealous sphinx.

Who was she, anyway? A little more than a serving maid, or a little less? The landlady of a cafe with a bower, an amiable, discrete woman — and those eyes no doubt knew how to close at the right moment, those eyes of cold water, as deep and as cold under their dull blue-green reflections as the River Calycadnus, tomb of Frederick Barbarossa!

When she had served me, seeing that she was crossing her arms in idleness and boredom, I requested:

"Come a little closer and look at me, so that I may see your eyes." She approached, but replied:

"My eyes? But they frighten people!"

"That may be — and yet people also love them. They must have been much loved and must be much loved still!"

"My eyes of water frighten people and they always have. They are like two drops of water taken from the river, are they not? My mother had the same eyes of water, and, when she died, as soon as her heart stopped beating, her eyes melted like two pieces of ice and flowed down her cheeks. I saw it, I was very young then and now I think about it every day when I look in the mirror and comb my hair. My eyes will disappear just as my mother's did, and sometimes I fear they will disappear while I am still alive, and return to the river to flow among the bulrushes and over the pebbles. I have never wept. If my poor eyes wept, they would disappear. I longed to weep once, so long ago! Only once. But since then I have hardened my heart so much that nothing can move me — for I value my eyes. I use them to frighten people, they are my weapon against men's desire. Ugly and old as I am, men might still want me for a little while when they are drunk and when they see my hands. Often I come in as they begin quarreling and, with my eyes averted, I take their raised hand gently in mine. They obey me, they keep hold of my fingers and kiss them, they try to whip up my blood with passionate and coarse words — but, lifting my head, I stare at the stallion with my cold eyes, my eyes of water, and he lets go of my hand. I stare at him until his frozen desire chills his very blood. When I saw you enter, I felt you were of like spirit, and I spared you."

"No," I said, "you did not spare me. I was afraid of you also, but with a strange fear, since, although I tremble before your eyes, I love them."

She replied violently:



"That is not true. Nobody has ever loved my eyes, I have been spurned because of my eyes, and I have run away from the only person for whom I would have wept if only he had spoken one word of love to me. Do you really love my eyes? Liar! Look at them then, and drown your love in the depth of these two fountains of hate."

"My love floats on the surface," I replied. "And it is you who are lying. I am not the first to be fascinated by these eyes of water, half blue-green, half violet, these eyes where (and I am telling you my first impression) so many souls must have fallen, in the belief that they were falling into the heavens!"

"No, no!" she cried, growing pale with anger. "Everybody knows that my eyes are the path to Hell! Falling into the heavens? Are men angels, then, that they fall into the heavens? You are mad, my friend."

"And what about you?"

"I, too, am mad, sir." And with a sudden about-face, she was gone.

In truth, that strange encounter left me in a near-unbalanced state of mind. My hand shook when I went to refill my glass, and I had to make two attempts before I could bring my glass to my lips. What a unique woman whose social condition so contradicted her intelligence and her manner of speaking!

The innkeeper arrived unexpectedly and said to me in a familiar tone:

"She didn't disturb you too much, did she? It's a shame that she's mad, isn't it? They saved her from drowning some years ago. Nobody claimed her, she had some money on her, so she stayed. We never knew anything more. She's only wicked in her words; she's useful to us and we like her well enough. We've grown used to her eyes and her stories. She speaks well, doesn't she? But what she says, she must have gotten from books in days gone by, as it's all above her station. All the same, she could well be a lady. You never know."

Originally published as "Les Yeux d'eau," in *Histoires magiques* (1894).

## STRATAGEMS

*To Octave Mirbeau*

**BITTER WANDERINGS** among successive women.

Distant, first recollection. She comes to me with all the awkwardness of a growing girl in a school smock. Ink stains on her smock; freckles on her nose. Eyes the color of blackberries; teeth like hazelnuts: black-



berries eaten together, hazelnuts crunched along the hedgerows, along empty lanes, and in the grass and dew, among the fresh flowers.

Then . . . Oh! this really was the one. Being next to her, talking to her, laughing, blushing, that was a joy unknown to me, the joy of blossoming. Her hair curled prettily on her brow.

Chloe sang like a washerwoman at the river. Ah! daughter of the king! Ah! old Homer! I believed she was Nausicaa.

He put his hand on my belly.

I told him: put it lower,

I told him: put it lower!

Chloe sang like a washerwoman at the river.

And then?

. . .

That's all I know.

And then? The blinds drawn: posts, trees, and cottages pass by. On the turntables, the wheels rumble. The shadows are violet. The swaying of the train rocks the fleeting embrace . . . Through the door, farewell! Never again? Never again. Your name? Where do you live? Kisses consumed our lips, our lips did not move to speak. Ah! the train that travels on and on! Ah! my life that travels on and on!

And then? Meetings. No. No longer. Yes. Why not relive this for a moment: the charming dreamer on my shoulder weeping in her exile. She was afraid at night, sleeping alone . . .

The little middle-class daughter of a little middle-class man, looking very attractive in her inexpensive yet respectable best dress: "No gifts," said her firm, discreet voice, "just a new entry in my savings book. That way, my husband is happy, he calls me his little ant. When we have a thousand it will be our private income, and a good income at that, my darling." In her silences, she was truly charming.

Soft footsteps on the creaking floor. The door opens, unlocked at the appointed hour. Imprudent light, but pleasure in the shadows becomes too languid. Yet there are eyes at the ends of her fingers, cat's eyes made for darkness. . . . Sometimes I blow out the light. I prefer your heart to the crown embroidered upon it — and you do not like distractions. The leaves fell. In Paris? There she had her routines and some surprises.

I remember she did not like distractions.

Is it really worth it? Worth giving oneself?



Farewell, my virginity,  
Ha! So you are leaving!

Said the little virgin . . . Is it really worth it?

The Swedish woman loved me and we had some delightfully shivery rides into the pale blue of the polar nights. Ah! how she wept one day, and how bad I was to she who was so good!

And so it ends, and I have found nothing since the shivery blue of our polar rides . . .

. . . Put thought into your delight, soul into your fragrance, emotion into your touch . . .

Desires, pomegranates full of imprisoned rubies whose brilliance flows with a bite — a woman's bite.

Some women know how to bite in the right place. They are not to be despised, these women who preserve the traditions of Venus — but it is all so monotonous, and artists are so rare.

. . . Must I start to wander bitterly again amongst successive women? . . .

At the Louvre, before the Mater Dolorosa whose eyes are two drops of blood,

(Oh! how sorrowful and painful!)

a woman in ecstasy (or so I believed — but she was merely bored) suddenly captured my attention when she turned her head toward the inquisitive man leaning there, with the dull coldness of her stare, the vague irony of her frozen smile . . . Her hair was blond, almost red under her black hat fastened down toward her ears studded with amethysts (which equitably matched the dying violet of her eyes), her bonnet strings pinned with antique silver.

I urged myself to utter pleasantries that she echoed . . .

When she walked, having given me permission to accompany her with an almost sweet batting of eyelashes, the undulating indolence of her movements revealed a body developed according to Oriental aesthetics, with thin bones, a flexible frame, ample flesh — not without a tendency to slight overproportion.

We left via the Mantegna. Brief words — and before those symbols, we stood for a few moments, perplexed at ourselves . . . She tried, aroused by such enigmas, to unveil a little of her spirituality, and in a voice that echoed the indolent procession of her gait: I saw her, undecided and imprecise, unconscious of her secret inclinations, drawn toward he that would say: "This is what you want."



Going downstairs toward Ariane, she stopped halfway, and went back up a few steps, as if waving farewell to the Victory. But I realized that this was half a ruse, for she turned around again suddenly: she wanted to see me without appearing to look at me.

"See you tomorrow!" I said rather fervently.

She deigned to laugh a little, pulling down the veil of her hat, mouthing a not-too-dubious perhaps — and then she went.

I meet her again going upstairs. We let the crimson robe quiver in the glorious winds of the Archipelago, and, with silent accord, we make for the door — already friends, or so it seems.

Listening to the inevitable complaints: not one man has ever seduced her desire, for more than a second . . . She had a husband who is the lot of every woman alive, the initiator of women into the realm of "almost" . . . He died . . . He was a character preoccupied with elegantly and decisively climbing the rungs of the social ladder . . .

I do not listen. What does it matter who she is, prostitute or marchioness, or both? And I think: here is a companion for the game of elementary sensations, flesh malleable in experiments of virtuality and a soul bored enough to agree to voyage toward the island where Chimeras enjoy being chimeras . . .

"Rich . . ."

Here, I interrupted her to say:

"The mere perfume of a sprig of mignonette can lead a long way, and all the truths of opulence are exceeded simply by the rustle of a piece of antique silk . . ."

Having crossed the Seine, we reach the deserts of the Avenue de Breteuil (where her Solitude has taken refuge); tamed now, she questions me with a desperation that flatters my elected role as extravagant comforter:

"How much can a perspicacious mind penetrate another?"

"Very little."

"What, then, is intimacy?"

"An exchange of wills."

I answer thus, "And why not?"

She dismisses me. We separate, still strangers. It is imprudent, but when I think about it, it is too late. "But then," I say again, "what does the baptism of her essence mean to me — and, if I make you suffer pleasantly, what other account will you require of me, unless you are mad?"



She comes to my home.

"A monk in a scapular is singing antiphons to the Virgin, she weeps with terror and love..."

"Where?"

"There, on this parchment crossed with red lines and punctuated with black, can you not see? — and this other who, in the flame of an iron lamp (more twisted than viburnum), is softening the virgin wax of the Abbey seals, can you not see him? — and this other one, watering the sacred irises in the garden of dreams, can you not see him?..."

"It is you!"

"She is beginning to understand."

"Daphne! See how the Laurel deceived the golden-haloed Apollo. The evil woman had the irony to enfold herself in bark — and the crimson spots of her unkissed breasts blossom among the golden horns of the jealous Diana. No goat has grazed on the axillary lichen of her naked branches, and the drunken Faun has abandoned for the crevice of the perverse ash, the unpolluted hiatus of her sex bejeweled with amber and topaz... Would you have liked Apollo? See how handsome he is, and more amorous than a turgescent thyrsus, than an arched catkin weeping tears of pollen..."

"Yes, but what about this halo?"

"Oh! I shall love you! I shall love you — when the green Dragon has lost its horns!"

"Who spoke, dear, is it me, or you?"

"Oh! when I speak, it is to say things that are within everybody's reach."

Like A'lmindor powdered by the Eisen, I stretch out a little on the grass of the cushions and I compliment her on her extremely white complexion. A tap of her fan on my fingers is her reply.

"Have we not set off for Cythera?"

"No breeze swells the mauve silk sails and we have no oarsmen."

"I assure you, I will row, charming Acine — and you will guide the rudder."

"Oh! I am so afraid. A distraction..."

"Do not expect any from me!"

"Oh! I would not risk it!"

At her home.

While the spell of the sonata that my random fingers marked out for her perturbs me, I sit down, far away from her, on the sofa, with my eyes closed.



"... Ah! Is it my own desires, then, that have torn you? Here is the first stroke, the first cry, the first smile, the first tear, the first doubt... She flees! Come back! Come back, the crimson of your dress makes my eyes fill with blood, I see the red void into which my life is about to sink, everything is red: your mouth and my consumed flesh! Your breast decorated with red flowers was tender and painful... What joy! it was the bitter dream in which the heart was flayed: her mouth perfumes me and her hair brushes me!"

"So, where are you?"

I half take her: her mouth perfumes me and her hair brushes me...

"Read to me and I will awaken some notes on the harpsichord with a dying fall.

"One evening on the heath..."

"What are you reading from?"

"I am not reading, I am reciting it by heart."

"In what key?"

"Minor, oh! minor.

"One evening on the abandoned heath  
With my smiling, weary love:  
O sun, plucked flower, your heavy corymbe  
Dies and descends pale toward Limbo —  
Ah! if only I was with that weary love,  
One evening on the abandoned heath!

The tree frogs among the meadowsweet  
And the reeds were crying, infatuated:  
Scarab beetles climb along the shave grass,  
Blue jays make the frail branches bend  
Infatuated cries were to be heard —  
The tree frogs among the meadowsweet.

A dog, on the threshold of a half-open door  
Up above, cries to the waxing green moon  
Which gives a little joy to the blind sky;  
The cow stirs and lows before milking —  
A dog cries to the waxing green moon  
Up above, on the threshold of a half-open door.



Our feet bruise the diamond-studded grass,  
 We climb up the silvered ravine,  
 Dying slope to the disappearing path,  
 Knees weary and hearts refreshed —  
 We climb up the silvered ravine,  
 Our feet bruise the diamond-studded grass.

While we climb, our souls anxious  
 And smiling, toward the curve of the summit,  
 The dream, left halfway down,  
 Sits down pensively, head in hand,  
 And we climb toward the curve of the summit,  
 We climb smiling, our souls anxious."

I left boldly, half fooled.

Spending hours with a woman in an intimacy that goes as far as touching but never attempts decisive penetration: I can no longer see, when I look at her, the vague irony of her smile — her eyes, moreover, seem anxious now . . . See, does the tacit accord that unites us not debar the ultimate pleasures?

. . . As agreed, you came for me and the railway carries us away toward the woods reddened and gilded by the flames of summer. Autumn is as joyful and sweet as an untimely end: the beeches smile at imminent death; tousled like Bacchantes, the elms doze; the oaks, gladiators with gnarled muscles, wait ironically for the supreme aura; and the pines, all alone; and the larches grow sad at their own immortality.

The train stops, a pioneer in the middle of the forest. No houses, no visible path, a track through the undergrowth: we walk aimlessly.

All around us are the veiled airs of orange blossom and the hum of scents: the languishing honeysuckle, the elder, acrid like an imperfect chord, the murmuring moss, the shrieking dead leaves; the other notes melting into an indistinct threnody.

We take a few steps, and in the grayness of the alders, the bedewed mint evaporates: its peppery freshness intoxicates us.

Daphne (Daphne — she almost believes this is her name) sits down, stretches out a little, and, lying close to her, it is her I breathe. Unexpected fragrances: her orange hair, which, perhaps by some illusion, sometimes smelled sweetly of oranges, now gives forth the manifold scent of hay faded in the sunshine; the skin on the nape of her neck evokes the leaves of the ash tree, and, near her throat, foxgloves are



strewn . . . "Charming shrub, laid low by a wind of desire, my sole interest is in the tips of your branches, those hands that smell of the grass where they are lying, those wrists marked with the smell of daisies — your head, that mouth, the source where flows the acrid moisture of the flowering mint . . ."

With a twist of her knee she is standing up, then: "Let's leave, shall we?"

Her brusque voice sounds irritated, almost angry — the amusing anger of a bird wanting to drink a little from the hollow of a leaf, tipping its cup over as it lands.

Our steps, side by side, grow longer, and we fall silent, attentive only to the complex exhalations of the forest that in the evenings evaporates more abundantly, like a woman who, tired of the day's reserve, liberates, at the first shadows, her imprisoned madness.

The train was waiting for us, for we were hardly seated in our corner when it whistled. It was waiting for us and it brought us back, just as we had left.

"It really was worth it," Daphne's eyes seemed to say!

At the door, before opening the carriage, I took her hand and kissed it, her hand that still smelled of the fresh grass in which it had rested.

At her home.

I find her among baskets of old silken rags, looking very amused, serious, all her sensations concentrated in her fingers, made sensitive by shimmering caresses. Her thumb rubs the weft and sees the pattern of flowers and their shades from the shape of the relief.

She closes her eyes:

"Roses, roses enlivened with a touch of carmine, dog roses rather, and in the center, am I right? there is some yellowed white to pick out the visible pistils. A foliage of two greens surrounds them lightly, then opens out wider, and roses and leaves run all along the material like the alternate beads of an Oriental rosary, unrolling slowly on the background of very pale green, pale as the reflection in the water of the curls of the leaves."

She throws the material away without looking at it.

"Yes, I can see better on certain days, with my fingers, and my perception is sharper, penetrating my flesh like very soft prickles . . . How absurd that must be, do you not think, very soft prickles!"

I only smile a little, for here I am, in my turn, kneeling among the silks, and the contagious neurosis takes hold of me: it is enervating, much more so than the grass . . . Oh! here is a burnt crimson giving off



a fleshy warmth, Galatea (she almost thinks she is called Galatea now), fleshy, and like your cheeks on fire, their cerise velvet attracts my lips like your lips...

"Are you kissing my old silks now!"

She laughs, tipping back a little, her haunches on her heels. I lean over her, she sits up again. In order to regain my balance, my hand rests where it can: it lands on Galatea's naked heel, naked, coming out of her sandal, and my fingers revel in her softness, feeling the skin redden toward the ankle and quiver a little at the joints... The heel has escaped me: she is sitting on a cushion and her dress of a strange red, a crumpled poppy red, has been pulled right back over her sandals.

We begin again to feel the delightful silks. The mystic blues loom up, making the red seem paler and the green seem distorted. Farewell, grass, virescent shadows running over the watery reflections of the curling leaves! Farewell crimson burned by desire! Farewell, carnal crimson!... The open windows are blue, and we set off toward pale skies... Yet, I regain my foothold: at the contact with this blue-green velvet I jumped from the skiff and I see you again, Galatea, I kiss the blue-green of the veins that branch out at your wrists... Green? What color, green? No, blue, decidedly, this wrist, with its bruises encircling it with their blue shadows... Oh Blood! carry me toward Galatea's heart, oh wild gallop of veins, carry me away! And then, take me, wild gallop of arteries, take me and lead me through your secret alleys and most intimate flesh... First I shall follow the contours... But the dream yields in my hands: Galatea abandons herself, precise, to those hands: here are the arms shaped in their true form, with the composite joint of the elbow, the bend of the arm where the taut ligaments rise up, and, below, the double rounded peak, and, toward the shoulder, the adorable, fleeting curve of the muscle of the embrace... Shoulders, neck, nape of the neck with its little curling hairs, ears fringed like ocean shells, mythological conches in which whispers the murmur of love... The back, like a wave, quivers, and the great waters divide into two bejeweled waves; fluid loins dedicated to Aphrodite!... The hips, what a complex female organ!... The waist, I mold you with my joined hands, and how delicately I sculpt you, breasts of Galatea, and you, belly, pillow softer than the pillow of clouds where Phoebe rests her lunar head... The night has come, soft and sly: Farewell, Galatea.

At my home.

As if made for children, the little lemonwood table rises slightly above the heap of cushions, holding the bronze dragon, where the yel-



low tea already ponders, and the opaline eggshells to drink it from; the Steinberger in its Bohemian flutes; special spicy pastries; a few preserves, tamarinds, bilberries, and Chinese ginger.

When she comes in, these capricious preparations worry her. These savors of philters: secret aphrodisiacs must be hiding in the pâtés, the fruits, the liquids, skillfully measured out and diluted . . . How well she penetrates my intentions, and how odd she is not to want to, when she thinks that I do!

But I am not embarrassed by such an attitude, and, smiling, paying her entertaining compliments, I relieve her of her veil, her hat, her coat, her gloves.

Suddenly, she picks up her muff again, which she had thrown on the sofa when she arrived, and tosses it into the air right up to the ceiling, catches it, does it again, and misses. I seize it, we play ball, she becomes tousled, runs to the looking glass, taps her curls, sits down: that's all.

Her mistrust has evaporated in the game: she tells me about her day; I tell her about the minutes of waiting, sweet when one has faith in the promise that has been given, and yet I feel a slight shiver of uncertainty: finally, the familiar running up and down the staircase of her spine, the kiss of possession . . .

"A very weak kind of possession," retorts Galatea, "for one could easily let oneself be taken . . . taken, finally . . . without losing hold of oneself."

"At any rate, it's like the bird in a cage, deprived of its material liberty until its jailer wishes. The joy of the bird catcher would be more sincere if it were a soul he had captivated, but does one ever know? How can one pierce through the metempsychoses and assure oneself whether the prey is animated by the divine breath?"

"What is the sign of the soul?"

"If there is one, I do not know it. Just as some beasts have a deep-seated spirituality, so some humans are like a branch of boxwood thrown into the petrifying fountain, surrounded with an impermeable layer of matter that blocks off mental transudations."

"And I?" asks Galatea.

"Soul dear to my perversity, would I love you if I had not felt you had a soul?"

"Perverse? Oh!"

Obviously, she thinks perversity is making a woman falter on combinations of cushions and rugs and, there, violating all the mysteries of her lingerie and caramara, filling her with pleasure, in spite of herself — but not without a certain impertinence.



"Am I not," she wonders, "endowed with a soul, as well as gifted with some corporeality formulated according to a quite admirable aesthetic? . . . Make your Galatea complete."

I pretend not to understand and pour her some tea. Galatea prefers the enervating Steinberger to tea, which is too fragrant, and aroused; she feeds me some bilberry conserve from her spoon, makes me crunch the cakes broken by her teeth, drink the wine with which she has just moistened her lips . . . I kiss her fingers, which taste of ginger, and I hunger for living flesh, for flesh more fragrant than the yellow tea — for your aromatic hair, Galatea, for the fine radiance of your flora, my flower — for the acrid spices of your fauna, woman . . . No, no more, just to drink and to eat you . . .

. . . Ah! what savors have I found, novel and yet familiar! . . .

. . . No! Daphne, let us eternalize the remainder with desire: enclose yourself in your bark and dream while, golden haloed, I come to place my saddened lips on the arborescent flesh of my sterile love . . .

Thus ends the game of elementary sensations.

Originally published as "Stratagèmes," in *Histoires magiques* (1894).

## THE DRESS

THAT DAY, HE met her — the new dress!

She was coming toward him, slowly and proudly, with the smiling and mysterious grandeur appropriate to the latest aesthetic productions, with the provocative grace of novelty.

It really was her, it really was the new dress.

For a week he had lain in wait for her at the corner of streets, wide, bright streets where she could display herself, deliver up to the eye all her unknown glory, circle round, stop, set off again, and fly like a seagull above the shore. Outfits "for riding in an automobile" did not attract him; he loved only "walking dresses," and he only loved them once, the first time he saw them.

The new dress, the spring dress, was for him the great, perennial event of the year; he dreamed of it for months in advance, anxious about the forecasts of the observatory, hoping for a premature heat wave, saying his prayers to the sun like a Parsi.

In the all-embracing springtime, with its rejuvenation of flesh and leaf, flower and grass, nothing interested him — except the dress, only the dress.

What there might be inside, what shade and what texture of skin;



what breasts and of what shape, calyx or cup, high or low, united or hostile brothers; what shoulders and were they softly sloping; what back, what legs: none of that occupied his imagination for one moment. It sufficed that the dress was new, well made, and worn with style. That it could artificially veil serious physical faults was the last of his fears and the last of his cares.

Without a doubt, his love for the new dress was not entirely platonic, nor exclusively the love of a few rags pleasantly assembled on a model. He was not one of those madmen who fall for a handkerchief or a bodice, or even a pair of shoes, or who stop to contemplate the window of the department store where, from head to toe, is exhibited a bride, half chaste and half flaunting. No, but although the woman interested him less than the dress, the wine less than the bottle, he did not separate the dress from the woman — or rather, and this is a little different and explains the tastes of our strange friend, *he did not separate the woman from the dress.*

A naked woman seemed to him an absurdity, an anomaly, a little like a bald parrot or a plucked chicken; the sight of this inspired in him a feeling of rather painful amazement, and, in certain hospitable establishments, where his imprudent youth had led him in times past, he had had the sensation, he admitted, of finding himself in a Dahomean inn rather than a place of pleasure.

The Greek Venuses, no less than the modern ones, were to him guilty aberrations, and he only acknowledged the sculptor who respects a woman enough to preserve, at least in marble, the form and the curves of her indispensable plumage.

That day, he met her — the new dress.

She was made of very pale mauve silk in the shape of a cone truncated at the waist and toward the base, adorned with three rows of black ribbon, the last of which, brushing the ground, appeared to form the tiny pedestal of the pretty, specious statuette. The waist was dainty, also encircled with black, and the shoulders and arms were covered with a cape with three collars of a darker mauve, whence emerged, like a pale, blonde flower, the delicate head.

It is a costume that will soon irritate us, for soon we shall see too much of it, but its first appearance certainly charms the eyes, delighted by the fall of cloaks and furs, the unexpected blossoming of the feminine shrub.

Having met the new dress, he immediately fell in love with it. His heart beat loudly, a sudden fit of giddiness made him reel: his dream was passing by, there walked his joy. Oh! if only that dress would let itself be loved! If only it were not one of those arrogant dresses, jostling with disdain the purest and most sincere of desires.



"Oh dress, do not be coy!"

The dress was not coy. Like many of her equals, she allowed him to follow her as she mused past the shop windows, then discreetly turned down a deserted street and disappeared through a door.

It was a room like many others, not very enticing, overscented and spoiled by a divan that was too wide and too blatant — but the dress was there, right before his eyes, in his hands: he gazed at it, kissed it, breathing it in with rapture.

On his knees before the beloved dress that stood before him, stiff and disturbing, he seemed to be praying now, speaking mad, soft, non-sensical words.

"From the moment I saw you, I loved you... Oh! a mad desire... I would have given anything... How good you are!..."

His joy, however, did not make him delirious to the point that he did not realize the quality of his conquest and what type of soul animated the exquisite dress. He tore himself from his ecstasy in order to consult his purse, and before he heard the odious words of bargaining, he had satisfied the silently waiting desires and paid that pretty new dress what she was probably worth.

Then he began his adorations anew and the other let him, being used to more curious and even more dangerous fancies. Only inwardly she became a little impatient, finding this prelude long and ridiculous. Ordinarily, she managed her clients more efficiently and, guessing their tastes, satisfied them with skill and rapidity; but this one was bizarre. She tolerated him for a few moments more, letting herself be admired, she believed, and even flattered by these refined manners, and, finally, unable to bear it any longer, wondering what love there was to gather out there in the air, in the sunlight, on the streets, and what a marvelous philosopher's stone her "new dress" was, she broke away and asked with a smile at least to be allowed to remove her cape.

"No, no! The whole dress! I want the whole dress."

And he dragged her toward the divan, already embracing her furiously. She understood and cried:

"With my dress on? Never!"

She managed to get up again and she was unfastening her belt when she felt two hands mercilessly grasp her neck. Her head back, she fell motionless onto the divan and, blind to his crime, ignorant of the death of the flesh to which he was about to join his own, the lover of dresses satisfied his desire.

Originally published as "La Robe," in *Histoires magiques* (1894).



## ON THE THRESHOLD

AT THE CHÂTEAU de la Fourche, everything was mournful and grand: first of all, its sinister name, a memory of primitive, harsh, seignorial justice; the four gloomy avenues wailing like the sound of the sea; the moat where the black swans swam among the broken reeds, the menacing hemlock, and so many yellow flowers in full bloom, but like suns of death; the château, with its walls the color of a stormy sky, its roof furrowed like a plowed field, its narrow ogived and trefoiled windows, its decapitated tower, prey to a fearsome ivy that seemed to declare the perpetuity of life.

Having climbed the steps and entered through the door, one penetrated rooms that were vast, tall, and cold, furnished with oak, hung with tapestries in which could be seen again the crooked reeds of the moat, its mournful flowers, and its hemlock sheltering the royal promenade of the sad swans in their icy shade. No carpet, just straw matting; sleeping dogs everywhere with their noses between their paws, and that eerie specter (which I really never became used to) wandering from room to room, snapping his beak as soon as someone opened the doors — a pet heron. This funereal creature went everywhere; it followed us at mealtimes, pecking at the bowl that its food was thrown into, and periodically making a noise like a loose tile rattled by the wind against an old wall. They called it "The Missionary," because its sidelong avuncular glances made it appear like a certain reverend Capuchin father who had preached a mission at La Fourche — and whose death just a few days later had coincided with the appearance of this bird, wounded by a rifle shot and found in the moat by a gamekeeper.

This rather ridiculous story had amused me, on that first evening spent at La Fourche, when my host recounted it in a tone that, nonetheless, excluded any joviality; but the very next day, I became fearful of The Missionary, because of its self-assured manner rather than its ugliness, the certitude the beast seemed to display of being at home, being the master, and even of being there to accomplish some supernatural mission. It was never shooed away or shut up: as soon as its beak knocked at the door, someone would get up to open it, and, if it went out at the same time as us, it would precede us in a serious manner, not with the air of any humble Capuchin monk, but like an old judge, incorruptible and gently merciless.

The Missionary: privately, I had rechristened it Remorse.

One evening when we were leaving the table, having supped on ven-



ison and aromatic cider with juniper berries, I bumped into the bird by the door and I muttered impatiently:

"Go through then, Remorse!"

"Why do you not call it *The Missionary*?" the Marquis de la Hogue asked me abruptly, seizing my arm and staring at me with his eyes full of what I at first mistook for anger, but which was in fact terror.

He added in broken speech, his voice trembling, as if trying to reveal a secret in spite of himself:

"How did you know it was called *Remorse*? Who told you?"

"You!"

And with this one word, flung randomly, for I was almost as disturbed as Monsieur de la Hogue, I became privy to more confidences.

When we entered the room where we used to chat in the evenings, the bird was at the fireside where some logs were burning, standing on one leg, its head under its wing. Wanting to continue the conversation, I simply said as I was sitting down in one of the wooden chairs that resembled a pew:

"Is it asleep?"

"It never sleeps!" answered Monsieur de la Hogue, and, in fact, as a brighter glow issued from the hearth, I caught sight of the old judge's incorruptible and gently merciless eye staring at me, ironic and cold, its eye like the sullied brilliance of a star reflected in a duck pond.

"It never sleeps," repeated Monsieur de la Hogue. "Nor do I. My heart never sleeps. I can doze, but I can never reach unconsciousness. My dreams are so like the continuation of my evening thoughts, and, in the morning, my dreams tie in so logically with my thinking that I never remember having ceased to bathe in the full light of my intelligence, not even for an hour, these past thirty years. So what do I dream about during those interminable hours of my life? Nothing, or rather, I dream about negations, about what I have not done, about what I will never do, what I would never do even if my youth were restored to me. For I am like that, I am a man who has never acted, never lifted a finger to accomplish a desire or a duty. I am the lake that the wind has never rippled, the forest that has never rustled, a sky free from the clouds of action."

He fell silent for a few moments after those rather solemn, even declamatory statements, then:

"Do you know of my life? No, you are too young, and anyway, what the world knows of me is not me at all. I have never recounted my life to anyone, and, without the coincidence — or, rather, your providential insight — that made you utter a certain word a little while ago — a



name! — that made me fearful (I admit it), you would not be receiving my confession either.

“Here it is:

“I was eight years old when my mother brought back from a distant journey a little girl about my age, our cousin, at least by name, and whose parents’ death had left her as dangerously alone in the world as a lamb astray at night in a forest. This adorable little girl was immediately spoiled by us, and, for me, she was an ideal little sister, even destined to be my bride, an angel who had fallen from the stars to console me for all eternity. At twelve, I was a robust boy with highly developed sentiments, having grown up among shepherds, and I already loved Nigelle with an undying love that was the same, unable to increase or decrease, right up to the day I lost her. She loved me, too, with a similar passion; I knew it, and the vow she made to me in dying taught me nothing but my own villainy.

“As soon as a little reason was possible in my childlike mind, I formed of life a singular and, as I now feel, criminal conception. Having picked a rose one day at noon when its sharpened scent tempted me and the redness of its smile made me desire conquest, having wandered through the alleys of the garden with my rose gathered and neglected between my fingers, I saw how completely withered and wounded by the sun’s rays it looked after less than an hour — and it came to me that roses were for desiring and not for picking.

“And it came to me, with Nigelle passing before me, that women were also to be desired and not picked.

“Many thoughts assailed me after that primordial discovery, and, gradually, I elaborated a whole philosophy of nothingness, a whole religion of nirvana in my proud and weak head. One day, I summed it all up for myself:

“You must remain on the threshold.

“A few books had helped me, ascetic writings, a résumé of Plato, a few abridged versions of German metaphysics, but my doctrine was mostly my own. I became very proud of it, and I plunged with determination into the shadows of inaction.

“I applied myself to only perpetrating the simplest of acts, especially those that, while not holding out the promise of any exceptional pleasure, could not cause me any disappointment.

“I had passionate desires, I reveled in them, I wallowed in them, I became intoxicated with them. My heart swelled as if to take in the entire world. Desiring everything, I had everything, but nothing offered itself up to me; I had everything — but no love!



"It was only much later, in a solemn moment, that I discovered the existence of love. Up until that moment, pride had given me the illusion of it and I had lived perfectly happily, proud to have escaped the disenchantment born of all accomplished acts.

"Even today, and now that I know it, now that pain has taught me a lesson, it would be impossible for me to pick a rose. What is the use? This fearful refrain is singing constantly in my head and it has never been more imperative.

"Nigelle and I lived side by side for twenty years: she, becoming every day more timid and more sad, frightened by my fortune, a pauper who possessed nothing except the ripe harvest of her blonde hair; I, more and more proud and persistently silent.

"I loved her as much as anyone could love, but I only loved her as far as the threshold.

"I have never crossed that threshold, not even with my shadow, and the shadow of my heart has not even wandered through that palace of love.

"Welcoming and tender, the door was always open, but I turned my head away when I passed by, in order to contemplate my own desire, to commune with my desire, to confide to my desire the dreams I did not ever wish to realize.

"Cross the threshold? Then what? This palace was perhaps just a palace like all other palaces — but the palaces of my dreams were unique and unparalleled.

"She died from loving me, I, who had loved her with a love that, I repeat, was undying. She said as she died: 'I love you!' But I did not answer."

The heron changed legs, clicked its beak, and, with its left wing, passed the beak under its right wing: its ironic and mournful eye was now watching Monsieur de la Hogue.

"That bird seems ridiculous and ugly to you," my host resumed, "does it not?"

"And above all lugubrious."

"Ridiculous and lugubrious. I bear it as I would a punishment. It scares me, it makes me suffer, and I want it to be so. You can understand me when I say that, if I wanted to wring its neck, I would do so in a flash!"

"Do you ever think about it?" I said, "Wringing Remorse's neck?"

"I have," replied Monsieur de la Hogue. "But what is the use? There is no meaning in that ridiculous and lugubrious beast other than that with which my heart endows it; I only have to deny it for it to be as



dead as a stuffed bird. Do you think I am taken in by its inanity? Do you take me for a madman?"

The old man had risen, shaking the long gray locks that wept onto his pale, sunken cheeks; then, suddenly calm again, he fell back into his chair.

He repeated, soothed and rather sarcastic:

"You do not take me for a madman, do you?"

As I looked at him with a smile, I stretched my hand out mechanically toward the feathers of the immobile bird, and he rose again:

"Do not touch The Missionary!"

He had uttered those words with the voice Charles I must have had when he said to an inquisitive person on the scaffold: "Do not touch the axel!"

Originally published as "Sur le seuil," in *Histoires magiques* (1894).



***Selections***  
by Octave Mirbeau

---

Translated by Emily Apter

Introduction  
by Emily Apter



# Sexological Decadence: The Gynophobic Visions of Octave Mirbeau

by Emily Apter

If a genre can be defined by the parodies it inspires, then decadence received its consummate articulation in the writings of Octave Mirbeau (1848–1917). Hardly the decadent, Mirbeau was a turn-of-the-century pundit whose style combined psychosexual realism and sociological naturalism within literary forms as diverse as the comedy of manners, the muckraking political essay, the newspaper chronicle, the art review, the short story, and the novel. Mirbeau used the decadent mode as the butt of satire in at least three thematic areas. When hallucinatory visions of a gangrenous nature overtook his fancy (and since he was a long-time opium addict such visions frequently invaded his texts, particularly *The Torture Garden*, 1899), these botanical contortions are a pastiche of the “flowers of evil” tradition extending from Baudelaire to J.-K. Huysmans. Second, in writing about domestic interiors (*Le Calvaire*, 1886; *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, 1900), Mirbeau seemed to revel in creating in prose grotesque renderings comparable to art nouveau — often considered to be the decadent design fashion par excellence, with its claustrophobic, tendril-choked walls and hysterical, panfeminine decorative forms. Third, in his art criticism (the best of which helped to launch impressionist painting), Mirbeau spent considerable energy targeting the Pre-Raphaelites as an anemic, sterile, socially parasitical aesthetic movement. Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were used as models for a caricatural personage called “Kariste,” invented for a series of satirical pieces published in the widely circulated daily *Le Journal*. Like *A Rebours*’s Des Esseintes, Kariste is a predictably effete character: androgynous, impotent, and constantly in pursuit of *recherché* aesthetic pleasures.<sup>1</sup>

Botanical dystopia, art nouveau, Pre-Raphaelite painting — these topoi, often interconnected by a virulent strand of antifeminism, consistently served as sites of a parodic counterdiscourse of decadence. But with the introduction of antifeminism, the question of parody becomes more complicated. Mirbeau’s misogyny, anchored in an auto-



biography that included a putatively tortured relationship with his wife, the one-time *cocotte* Alice Regnault, led him to invent what was perhaps a not-so-parodic form of decadentist representation, although here one needs to broaden the parameters according to which decadence itself is traditionally theorized to include contemporary gender critique.<sup>2</sup> In his dark portraits of sexual psychology, specifically the sadomasochistic encounters between men and women (or, on occasion, men and boys), Mirbeau was among those French turn-of-the-century writers who fomented a distinct form of what might be characterized as sexological decadence. From his *contes* and earliest novel, *Le Calvaire*, to his most popular work of fiction, a docudrama of female domestic service entitled *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, Mirbeau portrayed the sexes as locked into a murderous master/slave dynamic in which the male partner invariably finished off the victim. The short stories published in this volume – “Poor Tom!” (1886), “The Octogenarian” (1887), “Dead Pearls” (1898), “The Ring” (1899), and “Clotilde and I” (1899) – all employ sordid rituals of masculine humiliation as devised by emotionally indifferent femmes fatales. These early texts may be read as preparatory sketches or rehearsals for Mirbeau’s Orientalist chef-d’oeuvre of male masochism, *The Torture Garden*, in which lurid descriptions of carnal subjection are anchored in feminine cruelty.

In defining Mirbeau’s decadence in terms of late nineteenth-century sexology and in situating his oeuvre within the history of sexuality and psychoanalysis, it may be useful to recall with Foucault that Mirbeau came of age in a period marked by “the birth of the clinic.” Mirbeau published the lion’s share of his writings between 1880 and 1905. From the 1870s on, modern psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis evolved out of medicine and philosophy, drawing in turn for case studies and behavioral documentation on a literary archive of late realist and naturalist writings by Flaubert, Zola, Huysmans, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, Guy de Maupassant, Alphonse and Léon Daudet, Léon Hennique, and Mirbeau, among many others of equal or lesser reputation.<sup>3</sup> As the influential psychologist Théodule Ribot wrote in his *La Psychologie des sentiments* (1896), literature afforded indispensable records of behavioral curiosities of new interest to the human sciences:

Sexual instinct remains the center around which everything gravitates; nothing would exist without passing through it; character, imagination, vanity, imitation, fashion, time, place, and many other individual circumstances or social influences, give to love, as emotion or passion, a plasticity



without limits: it is up to the novelists to describe all its forms, a task which they have not failed to achieve.<sup>4</sup>

In a letter to Claude Monet, Mirbeau provided a negative inverse complement to Ribot's statement when he gave personal voice to the *homme de lettres's* inferiority complex in the face of scientific progress:

While the natural sciences are discovering worlds and are on their way to clear-cutting paths through that which obscures the sources of life, while they interrogate the infinity of space and the eternity of matter, plumbing the primordial mucosity from which we hail in the depths of the sea, literature, for its part, is still moaning the same two or three stupid, artificial, conventional sentiments, mired in metaphysical errors, stupefied by the false poetry of idiotic and barbaric pantheism. And what is most terrible of all, is my own total impotence in climbing out of this intellectual morass, this lie, this abjection. I see clearly what needs to be done, but am incapable of its execution. It would necessitate a whole new education; chemistry, anatomy, geology, paleontology, embryology would have to be learned.<sup>5</sup>

Mirbeau's self-doubt and contemptuous fulmination against literature notwithstanding, he did, along with Remy de Gourmont, Maurice Maeterlinck, and Paul Bourget, among others, develop a stylistics of the "physic" or "physiology" of love that suited the vogue of positivism and disciplinary syncretism in this period.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that sexual psychology informed the work of doctors and writers alike comes as no surprise when one considers the close web of social connections that brought together celebrated individuals from medical and literary milieus. Flaubert grew up breathing the atmosphere of the operating table as the son of a renowned physician whose residence was located directly on hospital premises. The clinical research on mania, hypnosis, and hysteria by, respectively, the doctors Paul Moreau de Tours, Hippolyte Bernheim, and Jean-Martin Charcot was discussed with fervent interest in Parisian literary salons, and Charcot himself as an intimate of Alphonse Daudet and the Goncourts. Maupassant and Léon Daudet frequented Charcot's lectures on hysteria at the Salpêtrière while Henri Cazalis, a doctor with literary pretensions of his own, allowed his pen name "Lahors" to be anagrammatically encrypted in Maupassant's récit of autohypnosis and hallucination, *Le Horla*. Mirbeau's father, Ladislav-François, breaking with the family profession of notary, practised medicine, although he never



obtained the degrees that would have allowed him to assume the title of doctor. A threatening portrait of the paternal medical Imago was painted by Mirbeau in *L'Abbé Jules* (1888), in which a young boy is haunted by his father's nightly display of gore-encrusted surgical instruments. Later, in *Les 21 Jours d'un neurasthénique* (1901), the sadism of patriarchal doctors unifies a sequence of chilling vignettes.<sup>7</sup> Patients become guinea pigs in gruesome operations involving the "sculpting" of human flesh (a variant of this image may be detected in the macabre vision of the "art" of sculpture in "The Octogenarian"); the body's vital substances are vampirically sapped and transfused (as in "The Ring," excerpted here from *Les 21 Jours*); and syphilitic running sores are allowed to fester, disfiguring female beauty (as in "Dead Pearls").

These concrete points of contact between doctors and writers are interesting insofar as they chart less visible literary encounters between medicine and literature: nodes of experimentation in the fusion of pathography (pathological case histories), clinical or anatomical detailism, the diegesis of philosophical pessimism, evolutionary entropy and national decline, suspense plots of heuristic detection, the family melodrama of hereditary taints, and the discursive rendering of disease, sexual "vice," and psychic disorder in relation to the popular social themes of prostitution, homosexuality, *lumpen* oppression, and violent crime. Work on the social pathology of class hierarchy by Gabriel de Tarde (specifically his theory of contagious behavioral imitations from above to below entitled *Les Lois de l'imitation* [1895]) together with the translation into French of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886) and Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1893) also served to buttress the sociomedical underpinnings of that ethos of sexual obsession pervading decadent movements in every aesthetic medium. Mirbeau's particular articulation of sexological decadence matched the catalog of specialty vices offered by Krafft-Ebing to the politics of right-wing and subsequently left-wing, class hatred. If, as the contemporary psychoanalyst Robert Stoller has surmised, perversion is the erotic expression of hatred, then Mirbeau's vitriolic, sado-erotic prose works may be held up as exemplifying this theory in a literary mode.<sup>8</sup>

### Sex and Anarchy

Mirbeau's biography is marked by two lines of force, the one political, the other erotological, both conjoined in the combustive narrative rhythms of his fiction. Born to a Norman family of modest means and Bonapartist sympathies, Mirbeau's mother, Eugénie Dubosq, was reputed to be sickly in temperament and haunted by morbid fantasies.



His father, an authoritarian *ultra*, sent Mirbeau to the Jesuit Collège de Vannes from which he was expelled in 1863 for reasons that remain obscure. In his autobiographical novel *Sébastien Roch* (1890), Mirbeau included a disturbing (homophobically drawn) homosexual rape scene that, according to the speculations of his most recent biographers, Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, may have been grounded in a real incident that required institutional hushing up. More plausible is the hypothesis that Mirbeau was sent home for his intractable rebelliousness of character. As a young *révolté*, who coconspires with his friend Bolorec to blow up the school, the fictional Sébastien Roch exhibits anarchist tendencies that Mirbeau would later affirm in prefacing a classic of anarchist polemic, Jean Grave's *La Société mourante et l'anarchie* (1893). In the novel, Roch's dispositional propensity to erotic decadence — which leads him to respond to the advances of his Jesuit tutor in the first place — is inextricably bound to his attraction and repulsion toward authority figures. Taunted on the playground for being the son of a shopkeeper, the alienated Roch is propelled into the arms of his seducer, Father de Kern, who is portrayed as a predator lying in wait for his susceptible quarry much like the greed-driven capitalist baiting the poor and disenfranchised caricatured by Mirbeau in his political journalism. The seeds of Roch's furious class consciousness are thus sown in tandem with the coming to consciousness of sexual shame and the resulting emotion vented through a language of venom hurled at the "bad object."

Mirbeau came to anarchism from the opposite pole of the political spectrum.<sup>9</sup> Accused of being a deserter from the army during the Franco-Prussian War (a charge that he eventually had cleared), he muffled his disgrace and disillusionment with *la défaite* by turning his energies to journalism. He began his career in 1872, contributing articles on art and theater to *L'Ordre*, a Bonapartist newspaper, but throughout the 1870s he turned his attention increasingly to right-wing political causes aired in regular columns in *Le Gaulois*, *La France*, *Paris-Journal*, and *Le Figaro*. In 1883 he cofounded a reactionary weekly entitled *Les Grimaces* with Etienne Grosclaude, Paul Hervieu, and Alfred Capus. Honing his reputation (similar to that of Jules Vallès) as a master of provocation, imprecation, and invective, he concentrated his bile in an unrelenting volley of anti-Semitic broadsides, vilifying the Rothschilds, accusing the French state of prostituting itself to Jewish banking interests, and even slandering rivals such as the notoriously anti-Semitic Alphonse Daudet by insinuating that his original "Israelite" name had been Davidet or "little David."



Mirbeau completed a radical political about-face during the Dreyfus affair, although he had already begun to drift toward anarchism and socialism in the 1880s. His long-standing anticlericalism and aversion to the army, his identification with the poor and distaste for charity, his contempt for bourgeois values and temperamental *s'enfoutisme*, made him receptive to the anarchist and republican sympathies of many artists and intellectuals in his circle. In 1892 he published a defense of Ravachol (François Koenigstein), interpreting the terrorist bombing for which he was tried as an important strike against economic and social injustice. Stirred by Zola's "J'accuse" to join the camp of Dreyfus supporters, he fought the opposition on the journalistic front, unleashing a torrent of heated articles attacking noted anti-Dreyfusards, who in turn responded in kind, embarrassing him with the republication in *La Libre Parole* of his early anti-Semitic *Grimaces* pieces. Mirbeau's indictment of the nationally endorsed scapegoating of Dreyfus, Colonel Picquart, and Zola passed from the pamphlet into fiction with *The Torture Garden*, where, in the preamble, a group of natural philosophers expound on the murderous human instinct for persecuting the stigmatized, outcast, racially marked other. In the novel that follows, this allegory of predator and prey is carried over into a misogynist plot structure in which Clara, a Pre-Raphaelite hetaera of sublime cruelty, nourishes her erotic appetites on the spectacle of Chinese tortures applied to dehumanized prisoners.<sup>10</sup>

Fascinated by the submerged eroticism within psychic destitution and political victimage, Mirbeau often concentrated his interrogation of eros and power in portrayals of the decadent subject. If, in the personage of *The Garden's* Clara, Mirbeau investigated female vampirism within the decadent framework of an Orientalist garden that conjures up Giverny painted by Hieronymous Bosch, in *Sébastien Roch*, he explored the sexual politics of pederasty through a character study of the protagonist, whose febrile nervous system, rocked by music and romantic poetry, conforms to the type of feminized male enshrined by mauve and yellow literature and lampooned by its more homophobic foes. (As Elaine Showalter reminds us, "'Decadence' was also a fin-de-siècle euphemism for homosexuality."<sup>11</sup>) Sébastien's seduction by Father de Kern is couched in a medicalized rhetoric of decadence, accenting the twin fin-de-siècle obsessions of "devirilization" and "demoralization":

Little by little, Sébastien entered into an enervating and voluptuous atmosphere where, under that veil of divine love masking all carnal exaltations,



all sensual irritations, all organic depravities that rise from the virgin sex to the sullied brain, he lost day by day, hour by hour, without feeling it, without seeing it, the orientation of his moral equilibrium, the health of his spirit, the uprightness of his instinct. He did not resist, he could not resist the demoralization of his little soul, so skillfully saturated with poetry, chloroformed with idealism, vanquished by solvent, by the divirilizing morphine of untenable caresses.<sup>12</sup>

Like a deranged patient struggling against a medical orderly, Roch's "natural instinct" is derailed, drugged, and "vanquished" by the enemy, rendering him, after the fatal act is committed, a paradigm of psychic evacuation, a spirit usurped and conquered:

Now Sébastien was on the edge of the bed, half-undressed, annihilated, alone. Alone? . . . not a single moral impression subsisted in his spirit. He felt a lassitude in the vertebrae, a thirst that parched his throat, a general prostration in his limbs and flesh, which suffered no other perception of feeling, not even interior suffering. (SR, pp. 211–12)

It is this outer reach of existential abnegation — the moment where subjective identity deserts itself and becomes enslaved without consciousness of its subjugated condition — that Mirbeau consistently sought to decry with horror, whether he was portraying the rural migrant's acceptance of exploitation, the colonial subject's capitulation to the colonizer, the resignation of servant girls to the sexual demands of their employers, or, as was most often the case with Mirbeau, the "crime" of male fealty to a heartless, domineering mistress.

### **Male Masochism<sup>13</sup>**

Mirbeau, as was stated earlier, reverted to the drama of moral male masochism over and over again (a perversion, according to Gilles Deleuze, saturated, unlike sadism, with aestheticism).<sup>14</sup> His first novel, *Le Calvaire*, based on the story of his financially ruinous affair with a woman known mysteriously as "Judith," examined the psychological conversion of pleasure into suffering at the hands of a woman (the "oral mother") on whom the paternal investment of a crushing ego-ideal has been aberrantly conferred:

In our bedroom, in the evening, the lovely childish games disappeared. Love marked Juliette's face with an indefinable quality of austerity, reserve, and savagery as well; it transfigured her. She was depraved; her passion, on



the contrary, showed itself to be robust and healthy, and in her embraces, there was a kind of formidable nobility, the roaring heroism of wild beasts. Her belly vibrated as if in the throes of dreadful maternities.

My happiness lasted for a very short time. . . . My happiness? . . . It was an extraordinary thing really, that never, never, could I experience pleasure with complete joy, anxiety always came to disturb my short-lived intoxications. Disarmed, and without strength to combat suffering, I was uncertain and timorous in my happiness, as I would be all my life. Was this a particular tendency in my character? a perversion of my senses? . . . or does happiness in fact, deceive everyone in the world, just as it did me, and is it not just a more refined and persecution-driven form of universal suffering?<sup>15</sup>

Such perspicacious self-analysis serves in no way to curtail feminine hegemony. Each time Jean Mintié seeks to possess his mistress Juliette Roux (an endeavor doomed to failure from the outset), he is forced to rub his nose in the glaring evidence of her deceptions. Cold, aloof, imperious, and voracious, this "mother who enjoys" (to borrow a phrase from Helene Deutsche) flashes the mirror of the death instinct whenever she makes love to her male vassal. In exploring the economy of love in one of its most morbid incarnations, Mirbeau presaged the dark expressionist theme of *Lustmord*, as if theorizing in prose the contagious proximity between male abjection and the desire for murder. On a night when Juliette refuses to sleep with him, Jean's frustrated passion immediately translates into an impulse to murder her:

Not a single muscle of her body trembled at my prayers. Her neck especially exasperated me. Between her trailing wisps of hair I now saw the head of an ironic beast, eyes that provoked me, a mouth that stuck out its tongue. And I was tempted to bring my hands to the neck, to labor it with my fingers, making blood spurt.

— Juliette! I cried.

And my fingers, contracted, hooked like wire, advanced, despite myself, ready to pounce on this neck, impatient to tear it to pieces. (C, p. 184)

Fantasies of attack remain, of course, at the level of fantasy for the moral masochist, their violence turned inward in the form of enhanced self-loathing. The short stories and novellas written at roughly the same time as *Le Calvaire* may be read as so many endless iterations of masculine auto-revulsion and self-dispossession: When, as in "Poor Tom!", the narrator is coerced by his wife to shoot his beloved, mangy dog, the poor animal's hideous expiration at the feet of his master



hauntingly reproduces the suicide of the protagonist's soul and his abject prostration to a feminine will. Masculine pride is dissolved, along with life's blood itself, in "The Ring," in which a senile old fool, obsessed by the insane desire to offer to his mistress a jewel made of iron extracted from his own blood, makes a contemptible sacrifice of himself to a woman impatient for his death. And in "Clotilde and I," the reader winces each time the narrator stoops lower to placate a creature possessed of unreasonable whims. "Clotilde and I" is particularly close to *Le Calvaire* in its treatment of what might be dubbed "sartorial sadism" (a particularly refined torture for the masochist, one might say!). As in the case of Clotilde, Juliette's single-minded devotion to her wardrobe carries with it a castratory menace, with each article of clothing resembling a potential weapon:

When Juliette dressed, she became hard, almost ferocious. The fold of her brow cut her skin like a scar. She spoke only in broken phrases, lost her temper, and appeared bent on destruction. Around her, the room was pillaged: open drawers, skirts stranded all over the rug, fans pulled out of their cases, scattered on chairs, lorgnettes wandering over the furniture, muslin billowing in corners, fallen flowers, towels reddened with makeup, gloves, stockings, veils hung from the branches of the chandelier. (C, pp. 195-96)

Attended to by her maid Célestine, whose "soft and flaccid hands," wandering over her body, "seem made for fondling dirty things," Juliette flaunts her latent lesbian eroticism in front of Jean, as if to add an extra injury to his pain (C, p. 196). Here she anticipates the scandalous persona of Alice Mirbeau, rumored to have been, prior to becoming Mirbeau's wife, a famous Parisian courtesan who delighted in sapphic *partouzes*. The story of Alice, imbricated in the story of Mirbeau's masochism, unfurls in turn into the story of Mirbeau the decadent, because his writing of female sexuality was inseparable from his parodies of decadence and femininity in art nouveau.

### Alice Regnault

Born Augustine Toulet, Alice Regnault became famous toward the end of the Second Empire as an actress at the Bouffes-Parisiens. When Mirbeau began his liaison with her in 1884 she was the widow of a shopkeeper named Jean-Louis Renard and the mother of a son who died at the age of twenty-five. Mirbeau and Regnault married in 1887 shortly after the "Gyp affair," in which the Boulangist woman of letters



Gyp (Countess de Martel) let it be known in a *roman à clef* entitled *Le Druide* that she suspected Alice Regnault of being the veiled assailant who had attacked her with vitriol on the Champs-Élysées in 1884. Mirbeau became embroiled in the affair when Gyp attempted to block his literary career and a vituperative round of accusations and anonymous letters landed them all repeatedly in court. Bad press continually followed Alice: an enterprising businesswoman, she was thought to have become rich by investing the ill-gotten gains of her profession as a *femme galante* on the stock market. Suffice it to say, Mirbeau had to live down scores of nasty *potins* concerning his wife's emasculating character and exotic sexual appetites, as in the famous story about the "groupe de Carpeaux" recorded by Edmond de Goncourt in his journal. According to Edmond, the story originated from a *Variétés* actor named Dupuis who bragged about his "*coucheries avec toutes les femmes de Paris*":

Among his stories, there were terrible ones concerning the wife of Mirbeau, the above mentioned Alice Regnault. He recounts that one day, during the time that she was his mistress, she stayed for a very long time in her dressing room with a woman who, she told him, had made *pipi* in her hand, thus making him suspect (a suspicion later confirmed), that she had a taste for women. From that day on, one or the other of them would pick up a woman at the theater with whom they would bed down as a threesome. He added that one night, Monsieur Dupuis, on lifting the bedclothes and seeing bodies enlaced, had exclaimed: "Hullo, the Carpeaux group!" and from that day on it became the adopted expression, and the two lovers would say to each other, "Shall we do the Carpeaux group tonight?"<sup>16</sup>

Alice's biography clearly deserves more than salacious gossip. An author in her own right, she published several novels, the most successful one about a high-class *horizontale* entitled *Mademoiselle Pomme* (1886). It enjoyed considerable success in its day and affords a rather rare glimpse into the life and secret travails of a *demimondaine* from a woman's point of view.

One of the major obstacles to discussing Regnault's relationship to Mirbeau has been her treatment at the hands of male biographers. Reginald Carr, Hubert Juin, Jean-François Nivet, and Pierre Michel all seem to join the ranks of her more hostile contemporaries in adopting a condemnatory attitude, treating as self-evident the assumption that she was to blame for a conjugal crisis leading to Mirbeau's black depressions, sexual addictions, gynophobia,<sup>17</sup> and bouts of artistic



impotence. In his novellas *Mémoires pour un avocat* and *Dans le ciel*, in many respects extended versions of "Clotilde and I," Mirbeau allegedly took his revenge. Marital life is depicted as a succession of debilitating offensives on a male ego that is inevitably shattered and permanently shackled. It is, of course, difficult to distinguish what was apocryphal and what was apparently a real need on Mirbeau's part for a dominatrix as a psychosexual companion. Certainly it appears from accounts by male friends alienated by Alice (notably Pissarro, Monet, and Rodin) that she was materialistic and manipulative. But it appears equally certain that Mirbeau himself suffered from a familiar syndrome (clearly compatible with moral masochism) characterized by the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere as "delusional hate." After reminding the reader of the keen sense of pleasure and gratification that often accompanies aggression, Riviere argued with evident common sense:

Feelings of grudge and grievance too — the idea that "nobody helps *me*" — develops as a projection from an unconscious knowledge of one's own laziness and meanness towards others. This projection, when it gets too strong a hold and is not checked by goodwill and insight, is the kernel of most forms of delusional insanity, in which other people are felt to be robbing, poisoning, or conspiring against one.<sup>18</sup>

If we were to isolate one shared character trait in Mirbeau's anti-heroines, it would have to be their conspiratorial dedication to dismantling male mastery. Mirbeau seems to have imagined the world of heterosexual erotic intimacy as a postfeminist nightmare in which female autonomy threatens masculine moral and material survival. The "cruelty" of Mirbeau's *contes cruels* is thus invariably coded as feminine; however, by the same token, the reader is continually reminded that from this cruelty the narrator consistently derives his most intense masochistic pleasure.

### Psychology and Style

Mirbeau, it would seem, sublimated the contortions of his own masochistic case history in literary allegories of denaturalization, be it a deregulated nature itself or its corollaries in gender, art, and design. In his travelogue of an automobile ride through Belgium and Holland in 1900, *La 628-E8*, the narrator characterizes the Dutch Bradenbrager-Hof as a "caravanseraï of Western art nouveau." In this palace of "Modern Style," where "nothing was round, square, oval, oblong, triangular, vertical or horizontal" but where everything "turned, circled,



curved, twisted, rolled, folded, unfurled, and suddenly tumbled down," nature has run amok.<sup>19</sup> Hirsute nymphs, angry poppies, and sunflowers perched on the moldings like parrots form a monstrous frieze, while a larval excrescence spills over walls, doors, and floor. The "perverse" capriciousness of the female character is similarly presaged in "Clotilde and I" in the art nouveau design of a lover's boudoir: chairs resemble guinea fowl, and the patterned walls appear covered in "spilled intestines" (p. 998). This description seems to herald Paul Morand's castigation of Modern Style as a kind of "infection" that pervaded the arts and literature alike: "the pieces of furniture resembled those illnesses studied by the psychologists, clinicians of the age."<sup>20</sup>

Like Colette, who describes Modern Style in her memoirs as a lapse in French taste that came and went through the period of her youth with a bevy of sirens, glutinous jewels, and tendril-covered cabinets, Mirbeau experimented in *La 628-E8* with the personified imagery of art nouveau. Electricity performs the cakewalk, the cancan, the Boston trot, and the dance of Saint-Guy; furniture totters on drunken legs, and the balustrades, seeming to speak, appear to be held up by "frenetic sarabands of question marks."

Once again, it was the doctor/psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot who may have provided Mirbeau with a model for conflating art, psychology, and style.<sup>21</sup> Mimicking the dramatic passionate attitudes of religious mystics and nymphomaniacs, Charcot's (trained) female patients were, in a sense, the living embodiments of *psychologie nouvelle*, and as such they helped to code the visual representation of unconscious desires and psychic disturbances as feminine. The art nouveau sprite, struggling against a capsule of tentacular vines or pinned to a pair of wings (as in René-Jules Lalique's female-butterfly brooch of 1902); the seated bourgeoisie swallowed up by the decorative pattern of her wallpaper; the *femme-fleur* elongated and incorporated into the fluted stem of a vase, her identity merged with the dark forces of a tormented nature (as in Charles-Emile Jonchery's lampstand nymph of 1897); the medievalized mad virgins posed atop cabinets or kneeling at the base of display cases (Rupert Carabin's grotesque carved-wood furniture); the proliferation of variegated butterflies and snapdragons fossilized on jewelry, cabinetry, lighting fixtures, and ordinary *meubles*, or the "nervous and coquettish thistle," which, according to the master art nouveau craftsman Emile Gallé, constituted the very "signature" of his native city Nancy, all these diabolical transmutations of woman into hysterical artifact point to the troubling way in which the fin-de-siècle female, venerated as goddess of the foyer and erotic curiosity, was



symbolically entomologized within the domestic interior.

Just as Charcot appears to have woven the figures of female hysteria into the zigzags and arabesques of his interior designs, so Mirbeau set up a libidinal nexus crossing furniture and the feminine.<sup>22</sup> Passion and destruction are expressed through the medium of feminized domestic objects. In *Mémoires pour un avocat* the narrator's avaricious wife treats him like a piece of furniture, an inert and passive investment. In *Dans le ciel*, published for the first time in 1990, Mirbeau conjugates the misshapen forms of Modern Style *meubles* with sexual inhibition. His suicidal painter protagonist, modeled after Van Gogh and Pissarro, diagnoses the fact that aesthetic taste in furniture has gone awry as a symptom of the fin-de-siècle crisis of masculinity: "Do you know why they make such prodigiously ugly furniture today, charged with sculptures and ornaments so hideous that they make a refined man vomit? Oh! dear God, it is simply because the craftsmen no longer know their trade. They are no more capable of fashioning an elegant line than of establishing beautiful harmony of proportion. So they opt for giving not a fig for decor. . . . I'm just like these craftsmen! It's in order to mask my own impotence that I go looking for crazy forms that kill me, and you know, my young friend, they do kill me!"<sup>23</sup>

Mirbeau thus elided his phobia of women with his phobia of art nouveau, developing a language of "deviant" female forms that seemed to take their inspiration from the intoxicating arcs and swirls of the design movement that he criticized. In this vision, he anticipated Walter Benjamin, who noted in his arcades project that the strange "perversity" of Modern Style lay in the way in which it thematized "the depraved woman."<sup>24</sup>

When evoking his cherished theme of female depravity, Mirbeau folded the art nouveau aesthetic into a pastiche of decadence, alternately grotesque and comic. In "Dead Pearls" (akin in its decadent Orientalism to *The Torture Garden* and comparable to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), the symptoms of Clara Terpe's sudden, ghastly illness resemble the signs of bodily degeneration ascribed to art nouveau and decadence alike by their detractors:

Little by little, her body was covered in brown spots, her complexion, of so rare a texture, of such translucent mother-of-pearl, toughened, cracked, and became ashen in tone. Finally, it was as if there was some kind of growth, like the burgeoning of fat tubers lifting the gnarled, horny skin, which shortly thereafter exfoliated like dead bark. Her hands became two foul packets of ruined skin; her nose, tumefied like a soft pouch, soon



invaded her entire face, obstructing it hideously, with its purplish sack, oozing and hanging down. (P. 991)

An equally grisly portrayal of the aging female body surfaces in "The Octogenarian," which allegorizes the dark side of sculpture's metamorphosis of live flesh into dead art, as Mirbeau discovered one day on visiting Rodin's studio. An eighty-two-year-old woman, forced to pose for Rodin by her ignominious son, is presented in Mirbeau's fictive version with literary modeling effects:<sup>25</sup>

Immobile as a statue, her back was bent; her head, its hair rough and sparse, bowed against the right shoulder, in a sorrowful gesture. Her hands, and part of her forearms, were plunged between tightly squeezed thighs to hide the lower abdomen, throwing a pall of dark shadow over the pitiable nakedness of her sex. And, on the chalk-covered walls, in this atmosphere of plaster, among the cold white casts encumbering the studio, this bruised old flesh seemed yellower, with greenish highlights, lending it the smooth tones and warm patina of ancient ivory. (P. 988)

Petrified in stone by shame, the old woman assumes the posture of *mater dolorosa*, but instead of remaining a poignant equivalent of sculpture in words, Mirbeau carries the evocation of her body's grotesque ruination so far that the story veers into misogynist, aestheticist caricature. In the end, the disgrace of female aging comes more to the fore than the moral cruelty of son to mother or artist to model.

Hystericized, perverse, and denatured, female sexuality took its place as the anchor and continual point of return in Mirbeau's poetics of sexological decadence. In the current context of rethinking decadence, Mirbeau's gynophobic violence, couched in a personal history of passions that included an equal violence of political conviction ("anarcho-masochism"?), might be reevaluated as a crucial constituent of the decadent movement in France. With his pathologization of eroticism and politicization of sexual power struggles, he added a modern, turn-of-the-century twist to fin-de-siècle portraits of morbid, unnatural love. And with his grotesque, parodic renderings of stylistic aestheticism, Mirbeau gave decadence a kind of second life or second chance as a humorous refashioning of its former incarnations.



## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. Kariste's harangues typically target the well-worn decadent themes of deviant sexuality and denatured art, as in the following:

Ah, they give me pain, these aesthetes of ill fortune, when they preach in their flowery voices the horror of nature and life, the uselessness of drawing, the return of art to the primitivism of the Papous, to embryonic forms, to larval existence! . . . Ah! their princesses with spindle-shanked bodies and faces like poisonous flowers who pass on staircases of cloud, on terraces of sickly moons, in gowns of galvanized steel! Ah! their lovers, emaciated, and elongated like fishing rods, their lovers who walk without legs, look without eyes, speak without a mouth, who love without a sex, and who, under mechanically cut foliage, raise their flat hands, broken at the wrist by an eternal flexion! And their heroes who stink of sodomy, neurosis, and syphilis! . . . Instead of working methodically, learning to draw a beautiful movement of nature, a beautiful life form, instead of looking for the simple and grand, I finished by thinking that the violent contrast, the deformed, was all there was of art! (Octave Mirbeau, "Des lys! des lys!" *Le Journal*, April 7, 1895; reprinted in *Des artistes* [Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1986])

2. Although the treatment of the "decadent" life and work of authors such as Oscar Wilde has been retheorized within gay, lesbian, and gender studies (e.g., by Eve Kosovksy Sedgwick, Richard Dellamora, Margory Garber, Elaine Showalter, and Charles Bernheimer), there remains considerable work to be done on the aesthetic reframing of decadence to include recent redefinitions of gender ambivalence. Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson (Meridian, 1956), and Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979) still remain unmatched in contemporary scholarship on decadence, and their work obviously predates the flood of gender studies.

3. For a discussion of decadence that focuses on the historical relations among psychology, social science, and literature, see Eugen Weber, "Decadence?," in his *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986).

4. Théodule Ribot, *La Psychologie des sentiments* (Paris: Alcan, 1896), p. 253.

5. Unedited letter from Mirbeau to Monet, published in *Les Cahiers d'aujourd'hui* 9 (1923), as cited in Martin Schwarz, *Octave Mirbeau, vie et oeuvre* (Paris: Mouton, 1966), pp. 192–93.

6. See, e.g., Remy de Gourmont's *Physique de l'amour: Essai sur l'instinct sexuel* (Paris, 1900) and Paul Bourget's *Physiologie de l'amour moderne* (Paris, 1906).

7. Léon Daudet's *Les Morticoles* (Paris, 1894), a dark satire of Charcot's Salpêtrière and a medical dystopia containing thoroughly gruesome episodes, bears an interesting comparison to *Les 21 Jours d'un neurasthénique*.



8. Robert J. Stoller, *Perversion* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), p. 4, writes, "Perversion, the erotic form of hatred, is a fantasy, usually acted out but occasionally restricted to a daydream (either self-produced or packaged by others — that is, pornography). It is a habitual, preferred aberration necessary for one's full satisfaction, primarily motivated by hostility." Stoller reconsiders this passage in the context of further reflections on perversion and aggression in *Observing the Erotic Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 8.

9. For more on Mirbeau's anarchism, see Reg Carr, *Anarchism in France: The Case of Octave Mirbeau* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1977).

10. For a close reading of *The Torture Garden* in terms of these issues, see my "Hysterical Vision: The Scopophilic Garden from Monet to Mirbeau," in Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

11. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), p. 171.

12. Octave Mirbeau, *Sébastien Roch* (Paris: Union Générale des Editions, 1977), p. 203. Subsequent references are noted in the text as SR.

13. For an illuminating discussion of masochism that both clarifies and criticizes some of the distinctions traditionally made in psychoanalysis between male and female masochism and that reviews the categories established by Freud of "erotogenic," "feminine," and "moral" masochism, see Kaja Silverman, "Masochism and Male Subjectivity," in her *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Freud's notion of "moral masochism" ("an erotic attachment to the superego") is helpfully glossed by Silverman, who characterizes it as "a situation where the ego comes to take pleasure in the pain inflicted upon it by the super-ego — where fear of punishment gives way to the wish for it, and where cruelty and discipline come to stand for love" (p. 195).

14. Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," in *Masochism* (New York: Zone, 1991), p. 134. Deleuze writes: "There is an aestheticism in masochism, while sadism is hostile to the aesthetic attitude." Deleuze's notion of aestheticism rests on the masochistic subject's active fantasy of a maternal phallus, his disavowal of maternal castration, and his "icy imagination" of an idealized, mythical maternal Imago.

15. Octave Mirbeau, *Le Calvaire* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1986), pp. 162–63. All further references to this work will appear in the text, abbreviated as C.

16. "The Carpeaux group" refers to the famous sculpture *La danse* (1869) in which a male "genius" is encircled by a group of female dancers and putti. The sculpture stood on the facade of Garnier's Paris Opera and aroused much public controversy. Vandalized with a dousing of ink, the Catholic press inveighed against its lasciviousness (the female figures were criticized for their realism and resemblance to modern *filles de joie*). For a fascinating historical, political, and social analysis of the genesis and reception of *La danse*, see Anne Middleton Wagner, "Art and Propriety," in her *Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux: Sculptor of the Second Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).



This anecdote is included in Edmond de Goncourt's entry for November 21, 1889. See Edmond de Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, 1851–1896, vol. 3 (Paris: Laffont, 1989), pp. 350–51. This anecdote seems to ironically foreshadow Proust's coded use of lover's discourse, as when Swann and Odette agree to "*faire catleya*."

17. Léon Daudet wrote of Mirbeau, "Il est, comme Rabelais, *gynécophobe*." See "Octave Mirbeau," *Candide*, October 29, 1936, as cited by Michel and Nivet in their preface to *Octave Mirbeau: Contes Cruels*, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie Séguier, 1990), p. 10.

18. Joan Riviere, "Hate, Greed and Aggression," in Athol Hughes (ed.), *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers 1920–1958* (London: Karnac, 1991), p. 187.

19. Octave Mirbeau, *La 628-E8* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1908), p. 328.

20. Paul Morand, *Paris 1900* (Paris: Les Editions de France, 1931), p. 102.

21. For a full discussion of Charcot in this regard, see Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

22. Together with his wife and daughter, Charcot set up a workshop to produce his designs for the interior decoration of his own home. It was stylistically eclectic, close in spirit to a Shakespearian stage set with its sculpted bas-reliefs, massive wall hangings, and dark *mobilier*, idiosyncratic in its museal display of family memorabilia. Charcot's apartment was perceived by his contemporaries (Freud among them) as a kind of strange domestic fantasy involving the transmogrification of femininity into furniture.

23. Octave Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel* (Caen: L'Echoppe, 1990), p. 130.

24. Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle. Le Livre des passages* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989), p. 573.

25. Edmond de Goncourt relates Mirbeau's discovery of the real-life source for "The Octogenarian" in Rodin's studio:

Octave Mirbeau came to see me today. Soon the conversation turned to Rodin. It was enthusiasm, warm words for his exhibit, for his two old women in a grotto, those two women with shriveled breasts, and no more sex at all, who, I believe, are called *The Springs Have Dried Up*. On this topic, he told me that he had come upon Rodin modeling an admirable thing based on an eighty-two-year-old woman, something even more superior than *The Springs Have Dried Up*, and which, several days later, when he asked what had become of his clay, the sculptor told him he had broken. . . . Since then, he had felt a certain remorse at the destruction of a work praised by Mirbeau and had made the two old women that were exhibited.

For the rest, the story of the eighty-two-year-old model is rather curious. She was the mother of an Italian model, who had come there on foot to see him before she died, and the son had said to her: "Mama, I'll kick you out of the house if you don't pose." And he had proposed her to Rodin without telling him that she was his mother. (Goncourt, *Journal*, July 3, 1889, vol. 3, pp. 290–91)







## CONTENTS

POOR TOM .....	981
THE OCTOGENARIAN .....	986
DEAD PEARLS .....	990
THE RING .....	993
CLOTILDE AND I .....	996



## POOR TOM!

HE WAS A very old dog, my poor Tom, a thin, dirty old dog, devoured by red patches, eaten away by scurvy wounds, a horrible, smelly dog, whose ears and paws were always bleeding, and whose rough yellow fur, lacking any gloss or shine, like the fur of a dead animal, fell in tattered clumps, each day revealing a little more the angular carcass of a phantom dog. With his entire body broken down, only his eyes had remained intact and beautiful, almost young, the eyes of an old consumptive who could still bring me to tears. I loved him. Oh! yes, I loved him, as I never loved a living soul; and my tenderness for him grew along with his sufferings and miserable condition. To cure him, what hadn't I tried? I had consulted all the veterinarians; I had exhausted all the drugs, invented every kind of remedy. Alas! in vain! One day, I even told myself that what was good for man might be good for dog, so, despite the fact that I wasn't rich, I brought my Tom to the waters of Barèges, where I spent an entire season bathing him. The result was lamentable: Tom almost died, and I, I was taken for a madman.

Mad, I really must have been, because two months after this trip I married. How? Why? In truth, I don't know. In vain have I reflected, in vain have I interrogated myself on this rash and most inane act of my life, indeed, I find no reason other than that of madness.

Was it instinctive jealousy or natural repulsion? Thus it came to pass that from the first day of our domestic life, my wife, on seeing Tom, gave a cry of horror.

"Oh! the dirty beast... Oh! the frightful animal!... Oh! how he stinks!... Oh!..."

At this moment Clara had a thin, flexible little bulrush switch in her hand. Before I was able to block her arm, she delivered a dry crack of the whip to Tom's bony spine, who just stood there gently whimpering.

"This abominable creature is not yours, I hope," she said to me, looking at me with an air of severity.

"Beg pardon!" I said, "beg pardon! This dog belongs to me; it's been some fourteen years that this dog has been with me, fourteen years!



His name is Tom . . . and he's very sick. He doesn't appeal to you? You haven't looked at him carefully then . . . Tom, come here, my good, dear little Tom, come here," I added, addressing the poor animal who turned around and stared at me with grievous eyes; creeping along, his tail hanging down, he rolled himself into a ball at my feet.

I patted his head, his back, even the place where he had been beaten; I offered him tender words and, smiling, advanced toward Clara whose hands I wanted to take. She recoiled, as if terrified.

"Don't come near me," she cried, "don't touch me. What! After touching that dog, you dare! Don't touch me. Oh!"

Tom, meanwhile, was licking his wounds raw. When he had finished licking them, he scratched himself furiously for a long time. Tiger stripes of blood formed on his glabrous, granular skin.

My wife, completely pale, let herself collapse into an armchair. I thought she was going to faint.

"Get him out," she said in a weak voice. "Oh! get him out. I don't ever want him to come in here again. Get rid of that monster. Oh! what madness! Oh!"

"Chase out Tom!" I replied. "But that's impossible. He's an old relative. For fourteen years he has loved, sustained, and consoled me. He's covered with sores and he's suffering. But what would you have him become without me?"

Clara screamed, cried, sobbed, threatened, begged. Incessantly she repeated, with either sweetness or rage:

"Get him out! Oh! get him out!"

I was forced to relegate poor Tom to the courtyard, to the back of a barrel that I garnished as best I could with a thick bed of fresh straw.

Despite the fact that I am a simple being, my destiny has always had something strange and complicated about it; and I've never lived like other men. For four months, after the scene that I just recounted to you, I remained, solitary, in our little house, between my wife who was not my wife and my dog who was no longer my dog. Yes, I had a wife, and I hadn't a wife; I had a dog, and I no longer had a dog. My wife was the negation of my dog, and my dog was the negation of my wife. To have a wife, I would have had to eliminate the dog; to have a dog, I would have had to eliminate my wife. Morally, socially, what could I do? Who would dare say? Yet, I did not love my wife and I did love my dog.

Mine was a sad and bizarre existence! And how illogical! Each time I approached Clara, she pushed me away forcefully, and drawing her delicate nostrils into a little sniff, she would say:



"How horrible! Oh! how you smell of dog! Don't touch me..."

Then she would flee.

During the four months of our marriage, I had not been allowed once, not one single time, to embrace her, my lips had not even been permitted to brush the golden locks of her hair or the ends of her fingers. In the evening, her bedroom door was firmly locked, never never opened.

"Clara," I implored timidly, "be reasonable, Clara!"

"No, no... you smell of dog."

How was it possible that I smelled of dog? I bathed myself in every perfume, I emptied more than twenty precious bottles onto my skin, hair, and clothes in order to banish this persistent and chimerical odor of dog from my body. And I neither saw nor even brushed by my poor Tom anymore. He spent the whole day slouched in the back of his barrel, undoubtedly very dejected, withering away, and cursing me perhaps! Often, to catch sight of him, I would spend whole hours leaning against the casement window of my study. But he never went out. A few strands of straw sticking out of the mouth of the barrel occasionally moved; green, blue, and yellow flies, myriad flies, buzzed around, as they would around a cadaver. He who had never deserted me, who had never slept outdoors in the fresh night air, what must he have thought of me today, of me who suddenly interrupted the tranquil dreams of an old dog?

One morning, we finished breakfast, my wife and I. Her elbows on the table, her head resting on her joined hands with a tender movement, Clara watched me. She had a new flame in her eyes; around her lips, which were red and slightly parted, there was a stray trembling that excited me. And all rosy and languid, in a barely audible voice, she murmured:

"Kill him... kill the dog."

I approached her, invaded through and through by desire for that head, those eyes, those lips, the voluptuousness of that body, which for the first time seemed to become animated by love. I tried to seize my wife's waist, to hold her fully in my hands, to draw her toward me, brutally... but she still pushed me away, and in a low voice, light as a whisper:

"No!" she sighed. "No... kill him... Oh! I beg you."

"But how do you expect me to kill him?" I mumbled. "It's horrible what you ask of me... it's impossible. You don't kill old men because they're too old, the poor because they're dying of hunger, the sick because they suffer, hunchbacks because they have a hump!"

Without reply, she undid her blouse, and a corner of bare skin



appeared, radiant, intoxicating; she pulled the mother-of-pearl comb from her hair that had fixed the coils high up on her head, and her locks tumbled down over her shoulders, writhing like a huge, gold serpent, swelling, dividing, separating, and covering her with a thousand rays of fire. Bent back, her throat thrust forward, her eyes half-closed, her lips gaping open, her arms dangling, she murmured once more in the voice of a divine prostitute:

"Oh! kill him then!"

Resolutely, I got up and left.

For four hours we walked in the country, Tom and I. Twenty times I told myself:

"No, not yet! . . . Let's go up to that apple tree . . . over there . . . It will be there! . . ."

Once at the apple tree, I would continue on my way.

"Further on, a bit further on . . . Let's reach the oat field . . ."

Tom trotted behind me. At times, recollecting our former walks, he would try to stray into the high alfalfa, or else, his nose to the ground, he would track. From the field of oats, a partridge would fly up in a great noisy flap of wings, as it disappeared into a hedge. Tom followed its flight with a glint in his eye.

"A bit farther on, a bit farther . . . farther still! . . . Up to the little stream! . . ."

We crossed the little stream. Tom bathed his stomach and greedily lapped up the water. And we passed the apple trees, the fields of wild oats, the streams.

"A little farther!"

The sun sank, turning toward the horizon; already the birds were looking for their nocturnal nests.

"Always a little farther!"

At one point I had the idea of escaping with Tom. Yes, we would live, the two of us, in an old cottage, and we would contemplate the sun, the vast plains, and the horizons that turned blue in the pale sky, and the beautiful silent nights, haunted by the moon. When Tom passed away, I would bury him, under the moss, at the foot of an oak tree.

We had arrived at the bank of a pool in which the sun had dipped its globe of fire. I sat down on the grass, and Tom lay down next to me, panting. From afar, in the reeds, the bittern lowed.

"Listen to me, my good Tom . . . I must, you understand . . . And yet I love you . . . love you more than anyone in the world . . . Above all, don't cry out, don't say a thing. Don't reproach me anything . . . Come here, closer, so I can caress you once more, poor beast!"



Tom yelped, wagged his tail, and standing up painfully on his bleeding paws, came and put his head against my knee.

"I won't make you suffer, my little Tom.... I'll aim well, there, just between the eyes.... You won't feel any pain.... You'll pass out and then you'll sleep.... But don't look at me like that.... You give me too much pain.... It's not me, you know.... It's her, and she's so beautiful!"

He rubbed against me, the poor animal; his tail wagged more strongly, and his tongue searched for my hand to lick it. I turned my head. A few feet away, in the grass, the barrels of my shotgun shone.

... Clara danced, clapped her hands.

"Tell me," she said, "tell me how you killed him."

Since I remained silent, she pleaded:

"I beg you, tell."

Putting her arms around me, very hard, she lifted herself on the tips of her toes to offer me her lips.

"Go on, my darling. Tell everything to your little wife."

"It's horrible! No!... Leave me alone... it's horrible!"

"Oh! quickly! quickly!"

"Well then... he was three feet away from me, on his backside, and he was watching me... I aimed at him, there, on the forehead, between the two eyes.... But I saw them, those eyes, those beautiful gentle eyes, trusting and loving... and the weapon trembled in my hand. Tom! my poor dog, pardon me! He suspected nothing and barked gaily.... Ten times I raised my shotgun.... In the end, do you know how it was done? ... I closed my eyes... Bam! ... And I heard a scream, a scream traveled across the pond, awakening echoes in the woods, far away, filling the earth, the sky, all of nature... Bam! ... I shot another round, without knowing it... I saw nothing.... And all of sudden, I felt a tickling sensation at my feet.... It was Tom, bleeding, he had dragged himself to me and was licking me.... At that point I became crazed... 'Tom, leave me, I beg of you; Tom; don't cry, I beseech you.' And I pulled back the leg against which the head of my agonized dog was leaning. 'Bite me, tear me to pieces, Tom! ... but don't lick me like that, and please be quiet, oh! be quiet.... You terrify me.' My hair stood on end, my teeth chattered, a bird passed over and brushed me with its wing.... Tom continued to bellow and to lick me... 'Ah! my Tom, my poor Tom, I love you!'

"And incessantly repeating these words: 'My Tom, I love you!,' I hit his head with my heel, furiously.... The earth was soft, and his head disappeared into the earth.... He no longer cried out.... Only his body moved, his paws stuck out in the air.... He was buried up to the chest, in the moist and sticky mud, and he quivered..."



Clara, joyful and enchanted, interrupted me, clapping her hands:  
 "He quivered! . . . he quivered!" she cried, "he quivered! . . . Oh! darling love, come quickly so I can kiss you!"

Originally published as "Pauvre Tom!" in *Gil Blas*, June 1, 1886.

## THE OCTOGENARIAN

FOR MORE THAN twenty years, Mother Rosa Pelletrini had lived alone, all alone, in a little village in the Roman countryside. Her husband was dead, devoured by pellagra; fevers had carried off her daughter; her son, gone to Paris, married with children, did the devil knows what. And she, Mother Rosa, was eighty years old. Despite the fear of traveling that ordinarily besets old people, and despite the fact that until now she tolerated this virtually forgotten absence with relatively little pain, she suddenly desired to see this almost forgotten son, to know her grandchildren, to embrace them before she died. She possessed very little money, just enough to cover the trip's expenses, a sum painfully amassed, crumb by crumb, sou by sou, artfully scraped together by saving her alms, for, unable to work any longer, Mother Rosa Pelletrini survived on public assistance, on Sunday quests beneath the church portal. Certainly it caused her great terror to be separated forever from this money, her entire savings, to run the risk of a hazardous voyage at her age. But her desire, soon transformed into an obsessive mania, stifled the counsel of prudence, and triumphed over the resistance of greed. Besides, apart from the little infirmities common to all old folk, she was still in good condition, straight and game. And then, in her heart of hearts, she hoped that her son would be rich, and that the whole business would prove not to be a folly, despite her worst fears. Having never read Leopardi, Mother Rosa was an optimist. She burned a candle to the Madonna and set off, confident, gay, and with faith in her heart.

When she arrived, her head spinning a little and very tired, her son initially failed to recognize her. And when she identified herself, he emitted a terrible curse.

"What have you come here for?" he cried.

"To see you, my child," the good woman barely had the strength to reply.

He lost control, a sinister note in his voice:



"You would have done a lot better staying where you were, old trollop. I've no bread for you, nothing for you."

"Oh! I hardly eat anything! . . . And for lodging, a straw mattress in the corner, that would suffice . . ."

Her son thought a moment:

"No!" he said. "Go back to where you came from. We wouldn't know what to do with you here."

She entreated:

"My son! I beg of you! Go back to where I came from! How could I? With the little I had, I have nothing left. Trips are dear, they've taken everything I had. Return? Alas, my legs are too weak, they won't carry me that far . . ."

"They'll carry you to the devil! Be off."

"My son! So long without seeing you. . . . And this is how you receive me!"

"Ah! leave me in peace! Be off."

"Then you want me to die?"

And the old mother covered her eyes with her apron and sobbed piteously.

But Pelletrini had just had an idea, removed though it was from the threat of the old woman's death. He calmed down.

"So be it," he said, "I'll keep you . . . on one condition . . ."

"Anything! I'll do anything, my child!"

"It's that you'll work, you'll earn your bread . . ."

"Willingly . . . willingly. But, in truth, I have no strength left in my arms . . . I'm so old! . . ."

"Eh, do you think I'm talking about unloading cargo? You'll do as I do, as my wife does, as my children do. You'll go into the studios and pose. So be it!"

She did not know what it meant to go into the studios and pose, and when her son explained it to her:

"Benevolent Virgin!" she cried, joining her hands, "sweet Jesus! You want me to pose naked before a man, I who never showed myself to anyone, not even your father, I swear on the cross, not even to your father!"

Pelletrini snorted; this confidence transformed his anger into joviality.

"Are you worried that your old skin will excite these gentlemen, ah! ah! ah! your old skin!"

"My son! My son! You mock me!"

She had become completely red and flustered. She murmured under her breath:



"And then, you see, I'm too old! Nobody would want to paint my portrait like this."

"Don't worry about that! There are some who love old carcasses like yours. I know some..."

"No! no! You are a wicked child!"

But the model, irritated once again, started to beat his mother, and, after beating her, threatened to throw her out. It was thus agreed that she would go into the studios.

I saw her yesterday, Mother Rosa, at the home of a sculptor friend.

When I entered the studio, a very old woman, entirely naked, seated on the modeling table, posed. It was she. Immobile as a statue, her back was bent; her head, its hair rough and sparse, bowed against the right shoulder, in a sorrowful gesture. Her hands, and part of her forearms, were plunged between tightly squeezed thighs to hide the lower abdomen, throwing a pall of dark shadow over the pitiable nakedness of her sex. And, on the chalk-covered walls, in this atmosphere of plaster, among the cold white casts encumbering the studio, this bruised old flesh seemed more yellow, with greenish highlights, lending it the smooth tones and warm patina of ancient ivory. At this sight, a great melancholy overtook me, that incredibly poignant melancholy that the ruin of individuals and the death of things always inspires. And I said to myself, thinking of those I had loved: "And soon, you will be, you who are alive, O my dear souls, the same as mummies desiccated in their tombs. And the pink sacks of your breasts, which, so many times, poured over me the drunkenness of desire, will dry up, O my sweet loves, and will hang down over your vanished charms, more wrinkled, more slack, more hideous, than scraps of wood or dead eyelids. And your mouths, O my queens, where, in the perfumes of your breath beat the trembling wing of a kiss, your mouths will be nothing more than a fetid, black hole through which death blows, O you, divine lights of my eyes!"

However, she wasn't too repellent, the poor old woman. You could still see that she had been beautiful once. In spite of the wrinkles on her neck, the creases of shadow that hollowed out her throat between scrawny tendons and protruding breastbones; in spite of breasts, straining ignominiously with a strange flaccidity over folds of flesh that encircled her torso; in spite of her broken-down thighs or the floating skin that flapped against her like an old piece of loose, worn-out fabric; it was possible to recuperate an elegance of line, a nobility of contour, a beauty still alive, scattered among all these blemishes. Her legs especially, a little thin, a little too long, but straight and firm, with neither



pockets about the knees, nor thickening about the ankles, had an indefinable quality of youth and suppleness that struck me. The stomach itself, the first hideousness of woman to become deformed, the stomach retained full contours, certain delicate modulations, an almost polished curvature, despite the terrible fold that gashed like a saber, cutting a deep notch above the navel.

I studied her, at once overwhelmed by an almost dolorous pity and tormented by uneasiness. Seated on the table, she did not move at all. Ever since I had entered the studio, not a single spongy fold of her epidermis had trembled, not a shiver had shaken her poor muscles. A fly, buzzing around her, alighted on her shoulder, ran between the furrows of her wrinkles, buried itself in the pendulous rags of her breasts, retraced its way along her arms, and disappeared behind her neck without the old woman's apparently having felt any tickling sensation. To see her, so completely inert, she seemed made of stone, and nothing was more terrifying than the macabre immobility of this broken-down yet still living being. Her head, bowed down against the shoulder, attached to the trunk by tendons obliquely and violently pulled like cords, rested in a state of such incomplete immobility, that a hallucinatory fear possessed me. Because she was watching me, this naked old woman, she was stubbornly watching me, and her eyes, though it was impossible for me to perceive even the slightest movement of her pupils, or the lightest flicker of her eyelids, her eyes grew larger, but remained fixed on me, without moving. They filled with terror, passing from dread to anger, from anger to supplication, from supplication to shame, expressing, in a single moment, a thousand contrary, violent thoughts, all without moving. Not only did they not move, but worse, the more I watched them, the more a succession of the most intense, bizarre, abnormal impressions marched through them, the more they became inexorably petrified. Her joined lips dug themselves into her mouth, molding her toothless jawbones.

Suddenly, the circle of her eyelids moistened; a brilliant sheet of water covered the vitreous convexity of her pupils, and two tears that had fattened at the same time rolled down her cheeks and fell, light and warm, onto the numbed nudity of this tortured body. She cried, for a long time, without moving. And there was nothing left of life in her but these tears, which poured, drop by drop, over the brutal rape of her modesty, infinite sufferings of her inviolable soul.

Originally published as "La Vieille" in *Gil Blas*, January 11, 1887, and, later, in *La Pipe de cidre*.



## DEAD PEARLS

CLARA TERPE WAS twenty-seven years old when she embarked on a voyage through India with her governess and numerous servants. She had just divorced, so as to be free to lead her life according to diverse and imperious fantasies, to caprices not yet fulfilled. She was extremely beautiful, "the radiant beauty of an empress," said the worldly historiographers of the time.

I don't really know what the beauty of an empress is, or by what particular trait one can distinguish it from that of a queen or, for that matter, from that of a laundress! From Cleopatra to Victoria, and from Victoria to the queen of Mardi Gras, I imagine there are infinite variations.

I prefer to believe that Clara Terpe was closer to Cleopatra, who was a queen, than to Victoria, who was an empress in this self-same India where the demon of travel propelled our beautiful friend. But according to the lyrical and symphonic portraits of her left to us by M. Albert Besnard, Clara Terpe truly resembled none other than herself. None other, that is, than the inspiring handsome thing captured by M. Albert Besnard's genius. One of these portraits represents her as tall, supple, curvaceous, with red-gold hair streaked a bloodish brown, green-gold eyes, and a full shape, nimble, caressing, voluptuous, and powerful like a tiger at rest in the jungle. And what a jungle, more terrible than the boudoir, with its forest of incense and evil, in which the painter shows us seeing vines suspended from strange flowers of temptation and mystery, above glaucous deep waters that are mirrors and looking glasses, reflecting unto infinity. Thus am I attached to this portrait.

She was also rich, having inherited from her father, the famous oil merchant, a fortune valued at over sixty million by the most zealous, respectful reporters. This fortune, which, thanks to the sudden death of old Marius Terpe, she collected earlier than expected, was, along with her taste for the free life, one of the determining factors of her divorce. It revolted her to share these millions with an insipid, useless husband who spent his days reading the *New York Herald* and his nights playing poker in the better Parisian circles. As they had no children, the affair could not have gone more smoothly; a considerable monetary concession settled the objections initially raised by this husband, who was at heart accommodating and well brought up.

From Kashmir to Colombo, Clara Terpe visited India in the midst of its triumphs. Several rajas, magnificently imaginative and happy to



distract themselves a little, offered her unforgettable festivities. It was said that at Benares, where a conservatory for bayaderes and bacchantes still exists, they revived for her benefit sacred rites that had long been abolished, and there too it was that she learned everything that the lewdness of ancient, brahmanic liturgies had to offer in the way of savage frenzy and accursed cults. During a hunt, couched beneath a golden dais and carried by an elephant whose trunk was painted red, she had the pleasure of witnessing a Hindu devoured by a tiger. She bought the most beautiful pearls from the fisheries of Ceylon and consulted the most esoteric mahatmas. Finally, she practiced making love, with black Tamals who porter coal in the docks, as well as with effeminate statue makers, whose skin is as bronzed and satiny smooth as khaki. It is also said that she savored the caresses of the little lace makers of Slaue Island, whose agile, vibrant bodies resemble small antique bronzes, so pure a marvel!

After two years' absence, she finally returned to chilly Europe, a trifle weary, a trifle sad, disgusted by our banal entertainments, our shrunken landscapes, our impoverished lovemaking. Her soul had remained over there, among the gigantic, poisonous flowers. She missed the mystery of old temples and the ardor of the sky blazing with fever, sensuality, and death. The better to relive all these magnificent, raging memories, she became a recluse, spending entire days lying about on tiger skins, playing with those pretty Nepalese knives "which dissipate one's dreams."

Shortly thereafter, she fell ill. She suffered implacable heaviness in her head, fire in her stomach, quick, sharp pains in her kidneys, and the desire for death, which suffused her spirit. Little by little, her body was covered in brown spots, her complexion, of so rare a texture, of such translucent mother-of-pearl, toughened, cracked, and became ashen in tone. Finally, it was as if there were some kind of growth, like the burgeoning of fat tubers lifting the gnarled, horny skin, which shortly thereafter exfoliated like dead bark. Her hands become two foul packets of ruined skin; her nose, tumefied like a soft pouch, soon invaded her entire face, obstructing it hideously, with its purplish sack, oozing and hanging down.

Called in one after the other, all the great doctors of France unanimously declared Clara Terpe to be stricken with one of the most dangerous forms of elephantiasis. Their combined remedies were useless. Each day, the evil grew, conquering her arms, conquering her legs, until the day came when, vanquishing all human efforts and scienti-



fic resources, it established itself definitively, reigning over this body of woman, formerly so handsome, a masterpiece of nature.

The wretched creature had recourse to the most skillful specialists in England, to the most highly reputed empiricists of Europe. She beckoned Zouaves and priests to her side. In her terror, she brought one of the most renowned healers from India, who had cured leprosy and resuscitated the dead. She bathed at Lourdes and in every holy spring of the world. Miraculous waters, unknown herbs, magnetism, prayers, all the invocations hidden in old books of magic, all the relics hidden in the recesses of ancient temples, nothing corrected the evil. And what was especially cruel was that it soon became obvious that she would have to live with this horror for many long years to come.

At first she thought of suicide. But she was always supervised. She had guardians who never left her day or night and who surveyed her every movement. Then she grew used to the evil. She gave orders to remove the mirrors in every room, all the overly polished surfaces that might reflect her image. And she took refuge in a single, constant passion: pearls.

She had always loved pearls. She adored them. She had them made into bracelets, necklaces, capes, and coats. Never could she restrain herself from fingering them, from savoring in some way the beauty of their orient, and the living magic of their water, subtle and changing with a thousand tender and iridescent reflections. She paid a lot of money to cagey procurers, old Jewish connoisseurs who were in charge of purchasing for her the most beautiful pearls from the fisheries of Ceylon and the Persian Gulf.

But an incredible thing happened.

The pearls died on her skin, contaminated by the infamous poison.

Little by little, they became tarnished; their smooth surface roughened in some way, and pricked with reddish spots, then the reflections faded; and of what was once pearl, an adorable, living, charming thing, there remained, by the end of several days, nothing more than a tiny ball of ash.

Because pearls live. Inside them there is an organic substance that sustains the heat of life, as blood maintains the translucence of skin, and a caress on the flesh. They are, one might say, beings gifted with an unknown and exquisite sensibility, living flesh on living flesh, which suffer if the flesh they embellish suffers, and which die, if it dies.

And so poor Clara Terpe shut her pearls up in sealed glass cases to preserve them from her own contagion. She no longer looked at them, unless, with lingering fear, it was through a triple glass shield, under



which the pearls seemed to cry and become anemic . . . like little imprisoned souls that will never again see the joy of sunlight, the joy of kisses, and the joy of feeling hearts beat under swooning flesh . . .

Originally published as "Les Perles mortes" in *Le Journal*, January 9, 1898.

## THE RING

ONE MORNING, an old baron came to my home. And, without preamble, he asked me:

"Is it true, doctor, that blood contains iron?"

"It's true"

"Ah! I didn't want to believe it. How complicated nature is!"

The old baron had a trembling, slightly drooping lip. His eyes were practically dead. And the skin of his neck, under the chin, made a kind of loose cravat of soft flesh. He reflected a moment, then said:

"There isn't much of it," he made out.

"Ah! Well!" I replied. "It's obviously not a mine like the one at Ariège."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that, from the blood of a man you can't extract enough iron to — how should I say — to construct, for example, a second Eiffel Tower. Do you understand?"

"Yes! . . . Yes! . . . Yes!"

And the old baron syncopated each "yes" with an approving but discouraged nod of the head. He added:

"Besides, I wouldn't need much . . ."

Then, after a short silence:

"So, do you think it would be possible to extract iron . . . a little iron . . . from my blood? . . . from my blood?"

"What!? Why not?"

The baron smiled, and posed the question again:

"Do you also believe that blood contains gold?"

"Ah! that, no. You really are demanding, my dear baron. There is only gold in teeth, unhealthy ones."

"Alas! doctor, I no longer have any teeth, not even unhealthy ones," the old man wailed. "And, even if I had any teeth, and had gold in those teeth, it would only be foreign gold, gold that hadn't been produced by me, gold that wouldn't be of my substance, in a word. Then, what good would it be? So, you are quite certain that there is no gold in my blood?"



"Certain."

The baron sighed:

"It's most unfortunate. I am truly sorry. Because, don't you see, I would have preferred gold to iron for my ring."

In the end, the doctor didn't press the point, he knew the baron was slightly senile. For his part, the baron began again, smacking his tongue over lips moistened with saliva:

"It's that you have no idea how much I love Snowball. I've given her everything . . . . Mansions, horses, jewels, lovers who make her cry with pleasure . . . . She has sheets worth fifty thousand francs . . . . She has everything a woman could have or dream of possessing. . . . And you see, I would like to give her still more, give her what no woman has ever had . . . . Yes, give her for once, and in a material, tangible form, all that remains of my blood and marrow . . . . my whole being, in a word, enclosed within a jewel box adorned with the most beautiful diamonds of the earth . . . . Dying is of little consequence to me . . . . What matters is whether I will have enough blood for this."

"One always has enough blood for things like that," I replied irresponsibly. "For the rest . . . one must do what one can."

"Ah! doctor! . . . I don't feel well . . ."

Exhausted by all the senseless effort exacted by this senile desire, the now very pale old baron fainted. I stretched him out on a couch, put his feet up, made him sniff violently acrid smelling salts, slapped his face with the end of a damp towel. The syncope lasted several minutes. Then, when he came to, I ordered him escorted, supported under the arms by two servants, to his car, which was parked in the street. He stuttered, between barely pursed lips:

"Ah! . . . Snowball! . . . Snowball . . . I'll give you . . ."

And propped up on the cushions, his legs like jelly, his head rolling on his chest, the old baron continued to mutter obstinately:

"Yes! . . . That's it . . . all my being . . . I'll give you all my be . . ."

The next day, he visited a highly renowned chemist.

"I would like for you to draw sufficient blood from my veins to extract thirty-five grams of iron."

"Thirty-five grams?" exclaimed the chemist, who could hardly repress his stupefaction, "by God!"

"Too much?" the baron asked uneasily.

"It's a huge amount."

"I'll pay whatever it costs . . . . And if you need all of my blood, take it."

"It's that you're awfully old," the chemist objected.

"If I were young," the baron retorted, "it's not my blood that I'd be



giving to my adored Snowball . . . it would be something else."

At the end of two months, the chemist had a tiny morsel of iron delivered to the baron.

"It weighs only thirty grams," he told him.

"How small it is!" the baron murmured, in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper, his face more pale than a shroud.

"Ah! Well! Monsieur Baron. Iron is heavy and takes up very little volume."

"How small it is! . . . how small it is!"

And examining the diminutive parcel of metal at the end of his trembling fingers, he sighed:

"So, there is my whole being! Not very pretty. Yet, there is in this black particle the immensity of my love. How proud Snowball will be to possess a jewel like this . . . a jewel made of marrow . . . made of blood . . . which is life itself! And how much she will love me? . . . how much she will cry with love!"

He whispered these last words, devoid of the energy to pronounce them audibly. And after privately repeating the words to himself, he announced:

"It's terribly small . . . and yet, there never was, there never was on earth, neither around a woman's neck nor on the little finger of her hand, a jewel this big . . ."

He fell into an agitated sleep full of nightmares.

Several days later the baron was in his death throes. Snowball was at his bedside, observing things around her with a look of ennui, a look that signified: "The old man is boring me . . . . He won't finish dying . . . . How I wish I were somewhere else . . . ."

A servant brought in a jewel box.

"What is it?" queried the baron in a raspy voice.

"It's the ring, Monsieur Baron."

At these words, a smile came to the lips and a light to the eyes of the dying old man.

"Give . . . And you, Snowball, come here, next to me . . . and listen well . . ."

With effort, he opened the jewel box, placed the ring on one of Snowball's fingers, and said, in a voiced wracked by choking and wheezing:

"Snowball . . . look at this ring . . . . What you see there, is iron . . . . It is iron that represents my entire blood supply. They opened and mined my veins to extract it all . . . . I killed myself in order for you to possess a ring like no other woman has ever possessed . . . . Are you happy?"

Snowball considered the ring with an astonishment tinged with contempt, and she said simply:



"Ah! well... my old man... you know, I would have preferred a clock."

Originally published as "La Bague" in *Le Journal*, June 18 1899 and in *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*.

## CLOTILDE AND I

### I

I WAS WAITING — with what passionate anxiety! — for the long-anticipated moment when Clotilde, free at last for three months, when we could, together — Ah! together! — savor our adultery, live our adultery to the fullest, without constraint, with nothing between us, out in the open, like a married couple.... Like a married couple in the sun, each on the other's arm, from morning till evening, can you understand the intoxication? You who read me, are you among those lovers worldly enough to feel this exaltation, so many times promised, always postponed?

Ah! there would be no more of that little ground floor apartment on the Rue Lincoln, so cold, so banal, so dark, no more secretive, devious spying from the concierge, no more terrible waits, rushed encounters or encounters missed, no more fear of gossip, or all those things, which from four to seven o'clock, dentists, milliners, fashion designers, and tea taken among friends, place invincible obstacles and elegant sorrows between two beings who love each other in Paris. Ah! God! no! It would be the continual presence, the infinite liberty, the solitude and the triumphant song of our souls joined at last, eye to eye, hand in hand, lips to lips, forever! The paradise so often envisaged and never attained!

This divine moment had arrived, it no longer mattered that it came at the end of some adventure. It had been arranged — since we loved each other in the manner of the most pure Bourget — that we would spend these three miraculous and blessed months in a typically English port.

"Oh! above all, not Italy!" Clotilde had said to me. "Italy is the dream of bourgeois lovers. There are only tepid excitements there. Only inferior lips have kissed Trajan's Column! And only vulgar little souls have swooned over the dull waters of the Lido. You and I, let's be 'modern love,' darling, shall we?"

"Yes! yes!"

I was the first to leave, so as not to arouse any suspicions, and also



so as to be able to choose a pretty coastal villa, on the sea, because hotels harbor unfortunate surprises for adulterous hearts.

As she left, Clotilde had said to me in the middle of a kiss:

"O my darling love, it seems as if I'm bursting with happiness . . . there, we will celebrate the first mass of our joy."

"Yes! yes!"

"We won't ever go out, will we? Because we carry all landscapes, all architectures, and every museum inside us!"

"Yes! yes!"

"We will be the one for the other, endlessly, as if we constituted a single soul, a single body, a single dream!"

"Yes! Yes! Oh! yes!"

"Provided that we have the sea before us, and above us the starry sky, what does the rest matter?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Don't we have the same thoughts, the same wonders, the same feeling for nature, the cult of the same beauty?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Ah! that we could be strong enough to endure such happiness!"

"Yes! yes!"

My heart was so full of gratitude and my throat so choked with emotion that I could only manage to stammer this eternal "Yes! yes!" which, as an expression of happiness, might have seemed inadequate or very monotonous to another woman. But I easily saw that Clotilde, sublime lover, only loved me all the more!

The house that I rented in a typical English town was delightfully situated on the anchorage close to the entrance of the port — a fresh and cheerful villa among trees and flowers, whose "modern style" of interior decor responded to the "modern love" of our hearts! Grand steamers and giant liners came and went, and the sea was endlessly covered with elegant yachts and a thousand tiny pink-sailed fishing boats. In the evening, it was a dazzling magic spectacle. All the electric lights of the port, the moving beacons of the ships, red and green, reflected each other in the water, and the signals, the blinking lighthouses, the beams of light, that traveled far, so far, exploring the deep dark sea, like Clotilde's eyes in the hours of passion, plumbing the depths and latitudes of my soul! And the stars in the sky were more brilliant still than these terrestrial lights, and that magic moon, enormous, white, and round, traversed, I remember, the main of a triple-mast! . . . I couldn't take my eyes off this grandiose spectacle where all the elements coalesced in emotion and beauty.



Ah! how happy Clotilde would be here!

With what renewed passion, with what charming confusion, with what impatience for a pleasure anticipated but not yet experienced, did I arrange everything, furniture, fabric, and flowers, for the joy of my sweetheart and the adornment of our love. I hired two pretty, English maidservants, who knew not a word of French, because I wanted us to be alone, alone! — Oh! so narrowly, exquisitely, and intellectually alone, that not a single being in the world would be able to understand the divine words that, from this point on, we would repeat to each other, and with which, from this point on, we would inebriate our eyes, mouths, hair, shoulders, all our sensations, our entire spirit, Clotilde and I! . . .

Clotilde and I! . . .

O drunkenness! O caresses! O marvelous folly of free hearts! Lovers's flight. . . . Infinity, infinity of unshackled adulteries!

Clotilde and I! . . .

And I looked at everything, repeating these two words to myself, I looked at the chairs that resembled guinea fowl, at the sofas, like garden benches, and the brass bed as large as a sea, and the poppies on the walls, and the fabrics ornamented with flowers so strangely simplified that one would say they were diseased larvae or spilled intestines.

Clotilde and I! . . .

She arrived one evening, fifteen days late. She arrived with thirty-three huge trunks, numbered overnight bags, jewel cases, boxes, and more of everything. Panting, my heart beating, I was there on the quay where she disembarked, exquisite in her beige felt hat and travel coat, also beige. Oh! so beige!

"Clotilde!"

I pushed past the passengers and threw myself in her arms.

"Finally! Finally! I thought you would never arrive. Fifteen days have gone by without you!"

"It's not my fault. I had nothing to wear."

She had suffered on the boat and was very pale. She tottered a bit.

"Oh! that cursed ocean! I thought I was going to die!"

"Finally! Finally! you're here! Our happiness begins!"

And as I went to give her a bourgeois peck on the cheek, she gently repulsed me as if saddened and shocked by the vulgarity of this greeting.

"Soon . . . at home! You lack tact, dear love!"

"Aren't we free to love each other? And why do you care about all these people you don't know, and who wear such ugly caps?"

"Very well, very well! See to my bags."



Before this pyramid of luggage, from the heights of which love seemed to make a mockery of us both, I couldn't stop myself from crying:

"God! what trunks!"

With a slightly pinched tone, she said:

"Is that a reproach? I only took the strict necessities."

"A reproach? Oh! How could I reproach you anything? I said: 'What trunks!' with a cry of admiration. I love you so much, and I love everything about you, even your thirty-three trunks, even when you sulk at me!"

We had to return without the bags, because it was impossible that evening to find a porter strong enough to transport them.

"Finally! Finally! You're here!"

But Clotilde said to me in a slightly irritated voice:

"Yes... yes.... You'll tell me all about it tomorrow. Tonight, leave me by myself... I beg you... I'm dead tired!"

## II

Clotilde spent five days, five days of torture for me, five eternal days settling in, methodically arranging, on little lace-covered tables, the bibelots of her toilette: boxes with gold lids, crystal bottles with gold stoppers, precious cases and antique mirrors, and brushes, and everything else! I could neither get near her nor speak to her, she was so absorbed in these serious tasks. She had no time to look at or listen to me. When I spoke to her, she never had time for anything, not even to dress herself or take a meal. A few brioches, nibbled in haste, on the run, and that was it! Ill served by the two maidservants who failed to understand her and misconstrued her nervous commands, she went, hair undone, vexed and impatient, from one suitcase to the next, from one room to the next, without knowing why or what she wanted.

Oh! the effusions that I had promised myself! And the long embraces, and the long endearments, in the evening, at the window, in front of the magic of the port! Oh! the intoxication after all this time, the longed-for safety of our adultery! Where was all this? My God, what had I dreamed of? Ever since we had been left entirely to each other, without husband, without dressmakers, without social conventions standing between us, with nothing between us but the complete freedom to love and to tell each other without end that we loved each other, Clotilde had never been less mine, never had I had less of her to enjoy, her cherished presence, her cherished spirit, her cherished looks! I came to regret the loss of old constraints, the delays to our meetings



and the suspicious looks of friends, everything that we had wanted to escape!

From the ground to the third floor, every room in the villa was crowded with dresses, blouses, chemisettes, and coats, in piles on the beds, tables, chairs, and pianos. And she had no idea where to store all this. Closets, wardrobes, chests of drawers, and linen cabinets were already full, and the piles never seemed to diminish. New ones were always coming out of those enchanted cases, new ones were constantly being formed. Hardly cleared off, they were replaced by others, bigger, higher, more numerous.

"But, darling Clotilde," I asked nervously, "why all these ballgowns? Isn't it solitude, precious solitude, that we came looking for here?"

"But I must at least have something to put on!" she replied.

And, lost in the middle of her cases, outfits, unpacked lingerie, footwear and parasols, and a whole heap of extraordinary things whose purpose remained a mystery to me, she groaned.

"God! this villa is so absurd and impractical! Nothing can be put away. It's enough to make one want to die!"

I tried to console her, to soften her, and I told her with infinite sweetness:

"You are wearing yourself out, my dear love. Rest, I beg you! You have plenty of time!"

She replied:

"You are truly charming! And what would you have me do? Was it I who chose this horrible villa, where there's not even enough room to turn around?"

"Oh! you are a little unfair, dear beloved!"

"And you are constantly on my back. You irritate me abominably. You prevent me from working."

How is it possible! I don't take up any room . . . I don't move!

In an even more imperious voice, she rejoined:

"First of all, I don't like being seen like this! I look a fright!"

"O dear, dear Clotilde! if you only knew how much I love you like that! It's been years and years since I dreamed of seeing you this way! This! It's my greatest joy! To be together, one on one, in the same house, O heaven! And it's only now, in the intimacy of each minute, that I can pretend to myself that you are my wife, my true wife! Can't you understand the enthusiasm and the melting sugar of this illusion?"

"You are wearing me out! How do you expect me to settle in if you insist on continually talking so foolishly? To be honest, I didn't know you could be so uncouth!"



She shrugged her shoulders, and I heard her say to herself suddenly:  
 "And all my white outfits that I forgot! And a host of things I'll never find!"

And the maidservants, under Clotilde's peremptory orders, searched the trunks, emptied the cases, and upended boxes from which violent and sundry scents escaped, permeating the house with a strange heaviness.

But I redoubled my efforts, believing that with my fervor and the force of my love I could tear her away for an instant from her dresses and cases.

"No! no!" she repeated. "I beg you, leave me alone and be gone! Be off where you wish. You're turning me to stone, I assure you. And these two girls who never find anything, so stupid they could make one scream!"

"If you would only allow me to help you!"

"Ah! That's all we need! Besides, I was certain it would come to this! You never do otherwise! Never have I seen such a gauche and clumsy man. When you've seen the moon in the sky and the boats on the water, you're satisfied! Well, go watch the boats then. Go on! Go on!"

"O Clotilde! . . . Clotilde! . . ."

It seemed to me that this entreaty should have wrested tears from her eyes. Her reproaches broke my heart. It was for her that I had chosen the prettiest, grandest villa in the region. I had done everything to make her happy. I thought that, on seeing it, she would have thanked me with tender words and endless caresses . . . and that she might have guessed that I had imposed on myself — with what disinterested joy — the heaviest monetary sacrifices! And instead of this, words like the following:

"You make fun of a woman's refinements! For the rest, it's not your fault! You're just like that . . . nothing can be done about it! Hold on, there you go again wrinkling the feather of a hat and piercing the lace of a blouse."

So I went out . . .

Because I could not even stay in the house, reading, dreaming, or smoking, in this invaded abode, where not a single chair was free, where it was impossible for me to find a corner without disturbing something of hers. I didn't even have the option of sitting on a trunk: they were all gaping wide open.

So I went out . . .

I had to navigate mountains of taffeta, lawn, batiste, valleys of lace, forests of hats, fluffy oceans of blouses, reefs of corsets . . .

And so I went out, sad and dejected, onto the quays of the port. But the port had lost its charm. I no longer recognized the distant unknown



sounds. And there came to me from the sea, from far away, I don't know how many regrets, not yet formulated, but bitter, very bitter, oh! So bitter! And the voices of the sirens seemed to me like the very expression of my soul's distress. To have had this marvelous dream of being together, one on one, without end, eye to eye, hand in hand! And to wander, piteously, along the shores where nothing interested me anymore, neither the majesty of the steamers, nor the rude physiognomy of the sailors, nor the forest of masts, nor the sails on the boats, setting out to fish!

Returning, I said to myself:

"O poetry of adulterous voyages! Is M. Paul Bourget amusing himself at our expense? That would be a horrible thought! And what a fall from the ideal!"

That evening it was worse still.

After dinner, generally passed in silence, and during which Clotilde assumed a grave and distant air, she stretched herself out on a chaise longue that had finally been cleared off. Which forgotten hat, bit of lace, blouse, or little nothing was she thinking of to merit so preoccupied a face? I don't know. She responded only in irritated, doleful monosyllables to the grand words, to the grand exalted phrases that I tried, on occasion, to extract in vain from the depths of my heart, from my poor empty heart, alas! And when I attempted to give my gestures the ample and precise eloquence often lacking in my words:

"No! no!" Clotilde would reply, pushing me away with her hand, "leave me alone . . . I have a splitting headache and I'm dead tired."

### III

When Clotilde was fully unpacked, she no longer knew what to do. After having conscientiously filed and polished her nails, after having tried on a dozen outfits that needed alterations, she became bored. She became immensely bored. Beyond the hours devoted to her toilette, hours that, by the way, prolonged themselves indefinitely, she dragged herself through the bedroom into the salon like a poor lost soul. Sometimes she took a book that she never finished. To the words of love I sent her way, she replied only with sighs of boredom.

To distract her, and in accordance with our old custom, I had initially proposed that we stay well cloistered at home, having made an enthusiastic eulogy to solitude. After beautiful hours of day and evening, we would station ourselves at the window, one next to the other forever and ever hand in hand, and our eyes, our four eyes would melt into



a single star. And silently, as befitted the occasion, stirred by the rites of the most exalted poetry, we would become intoxicated on seeing, without ever tiring of it, the amazing spectacle of the port and the sea.

She rejected this idea with an indignation mixed with disgust:

"You're insane, my dear! Do you think I came here to shut myself in like a prisoner? Ah! men are all alike!"

Either I was like all other men, a crude and insensitive creature, crass and tyrannical, or other men were "angels," and I remained, alone in all of humanity, a demon!

"Well," I said, "since solitude terrifies you, let's go out. We can visit all the harbors. You have no idea of their beauty!"

"Oh! the harbor!" she made out, "now there's a good view! It's mortally dull."

"How can you know whether it's mortally dull, dear beauty? You haven't once agreed to look at it!"

"But there's nothing so sad as harbors. First of all, they are full of diseases and you trudge along in nothing but coal dust. And then, I don't know why, but they send a chill through me like a cemetery."

"Exactly, dearest adored heart. There is nothing more moving than sad things, nothing pairs better with love! For me, harbors evoke a kind of sadness in my soul. But since we are speaking, both of us, of sadness, it's because we are about to experience powerful sensations . . . which are about joy, my dear Clotilde!"

Enveloped in a dressing gown flowering with ribbons and foaming with lace, she reclined on the couch. Her face was serious, her brow drawn by a furrow that I didn't like. She heaved a sigh, and went back to polishing her nails and wouldn't respond. From time to time the servant entered, her work in hand, asking for directions that Clotilde would perfunctorily deliver, often in an irritable voice. I was upset and stupid. I kept looking for clever distractions, unknown pleasures. And I was discovering nothing, having exhausted everything, and feeling that I could never recreate nature and life in the image of Clotilde's vague desires. And this absurd, debilitating silence that she loved to prolong, so as to savor my discomfort, was for me unfathomably cruel and intolerable!

After several minutes during which I went through every form of torture that the superhuman caprice of a woman can put one through:

"But, my love," I tried to explain. "There are not just the ports. This is a wonderful region here, and the countryside, which I visited for you, is splendid, like a garden. We could organize some interesting excursions."

"Oh! . . . excursions! Just like notaries, wouldn't you say?"



"But no! . . . but no! . . . I have an excellent carriage at my disposal!"

"Thanks!"

"And why?"

"You know very well that carriages tire me out enormously!"

"This morning, I saw a very pretty yacht. I could rent it. We could go wherever you wish, to Cowes, if you will?"

"I get seasick!"

"And if this region bores you, let's leave for London!"

"In this heat! You're not thinking."

"Alas, I think only of pleasing you."

"So it seems."

I sensed the bitterness filter drop by drop into my heart; I replied:

"It's that things are becoming very difficult. And you're putting me in a real fix. It bores you to stay in your villa. And at the same time, you refuse to go out. The carriage tires you, the railroad irritates you, and the boat makes you ill. As long as science doesn't give you wings, I don't see how it will be possible to transport you anywhere. You like neither the harbor, nor the seaside, nor the forests, nor the gardens, nor the fields, nor the towns. . . . In truth, I no longer know what to do. I don't know of anything more I can offer you."

"Well naturally, my dear friend," Clotilde replied with a smirk of indescribable contempt. "You are so clumsy . . . There is no man as awkward as you . . . You don't know how to find anything that would distract a woman . . ."

"Oh! Clotilde! Clotilde! You are driving me mad! And your unfairness is causing me fearful pain!"

She retorted:

"My unfairness! That is the last straw! You commit nothing but blunders, and it's I who is unfair! First of all, why did you bring me to this England that I despise and that you know I despise?"

I leapt out of my chair.

"That's too much!" I cried to myself, protesting with violent gestures. "What! You claim that I was the one who brought you here?"

"And who else then? Have you totally lost your mind?"

I could hardly speak, so much did revolt pitch one word against the other:

"But don't you recall! It was you, you alone, who wanted England. You said that Italy was too banal, too vulgar, too much like Cook tours! Don't you think I remember exactly what you said?"

Then, Clotilde, in an icy voice, without making a single motion, without even looking at me:



"Let's say it was me. My God! one disillusionment, more or less! I can't count them anymore."

"Clotilde, I assure you.... Don't you remember what you said to me! ... Let's see, one evening, at your place.... You had, wait, the mauve dress that's so charming.... You said to me word for word..."

She cut my speech:

"Why discuss this? It's understood... I was the one who insisted we come to a region that I detest above all others... whose name alone puts me in a rage.... It was I! ... Let's not talk about it anymore."

I didn't want to give up:

"Now this, for example! And I can prove it to you..."

"Be quiet!" Clotilde replied. "You tire me. And you are really just too ridiculous when you're angry. And would you really like to give me great pleasure?"

"But that's all I ask!"

"Well then! Leave for a while. Go take a walk. I need to be alone..."

"Clotilde! ... Clotilde! ..."

"That's right! That's right!"

And with rage in my heart, cursing all women, I went out...

Originally published as "Clotilde et moi" in *Le Journal*, July 30, August 6, and August 14, 1899







*Selections from*  
**Saint Lydwine**  
**of Schiedam**

by J.-K. Huysmans

---

Translated by Agnes Hastings

Introduction

by Richard Sieburth



# The Aesthete as Hagiographer: Huysmans's *Saint Lydwine*

Richard Sieburth

*It is no sign of benediction to have been obsessed with the lives of saints, for it is an obsession intertwined with a taste for maladies and a hunger for depravities. One only troubles oneself with saints because one has been disappointed by the paradoxes of earthly life; one therefore searches out other paradoxes, more outlandish in guise, redolent of unknown truths, unknown perfumes. . . . Thus does the aesthete become a hagiographer, setting out on a learned pilgrimage. . . He embarks without realizing that this journey is merely a brief sidetrip and that everything in the world is a disappointment, even saintliness.*

— E.M. Cioran, *Précis de Décomposition*

J.-K. Huysmans began writing *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam* in the spring of 1898, shortly after retiring from the French Sûreté Générale, where, for the previous two decades, his duties had included the surveillance of political subversives and the expulsion of undesirable aliens. Using the proceeds of his governmental pension and royalties from his recent best-seller, *La Cathédrale*, he began construction on a house near the Benedictine abbé of Ligugé in the Poitou. When he moved in the following summer, he intended to create a Catholic artists' colony, but greeted with hostility by the local peasantry and plagued by internecine squabbles, the projected community eventually foundered. In 1900, Huysmans finally underwent the ceremony of oblatehood at Ligugé (recounted in his 1903 novel, *L'Oblat*), but as fate would have it, the abbey was forced to close and relocate to Belgium the following year by the Waldeck-Rousseau antiassociation bill dissolving monastic establishments in France. His health failing, embittered by this most recent victory of state over church, he returned to Paris, where *Saint Lydwine* had just been published to mixed reviews.

There is a Bouvard and Pécuchet quality to the ex-functionary Huysmans's dream of the perfect retirement community: a mystical



sodality of monks and artists gathered together in the liturgical fragrance of incense and the manly strains of plainchant, with leisure hours devoted to the rereading and rewriting of hagiography — Des Esseintes's cenobitic fantasies finally fulfilled. But whereas the latter's 1884 withdrawal in the virtual reality of his Fontenay villa is essentially apolitical, Huysmans's recoil into Benedictine monasticism during the twilight years of the nineteenth century is instead driven by a truculent exasperation with the modern world in general and, more particularly, with the recent uproar over the Dreyfus Affair. Emile Zola had published his incendiary *J'accuse* in January 1898, and, replying to his former mentor's publicity coup, Huysmans brought out *The Cathedral* the following month — the first mass-market success of his literary career (17,000 copies were sold in the first fortnight) and a book which, riding the crest of nationalist and Catholic anti-Dreyfusard sentiment, put Chartres on the map as a major tourist attraction. Even the president of the republic, Félix Faure, is reported to have made a pilgrimage to the cathedral, Huysmans's Baedeker in hand (though this anecdote may be as apocryphal as Oscar Wilde's bringing a copy of *A Rebours* to his trial).

Huysmans's guidebook to Chartres is essentially a hymn to the virginal body of Mary: the soaring vaults and ethereal spires of the cathedral, the translucent radiance of its stained-glass windows, the impalpable codes of its medieval symbology all bespeak a holy anorexia whose discarnate spirituality — and sheer textuality — stand as a rebuke to the gross fleshliness of a contemporary France bloated with Protestants, Freemasons, and, above all, Jews.<sup>1</sup> *Saint Lydwine*, Huysmans's subsequent contribution to the anti-Dreyfusard cause, similarly projects the fin-de-siècle political unconscious into an allegorical female body. If Zola and his camp had militantly chosen to transform an Alsatian Jew into a figure of martyrdom, so Huysmans now fired back with the genuine Christian article: a hagiography of the gruesome sufferings of a fifteenth-century Dutch saint whose sacrificial reenactment of the Passion on her flesh graphically emblemized the spiritual and physical afflictions of an entire nation.<sup>2</sup>

"Les queues de siècle se ressemblent" (the tail ends of centuries resemble each other), Huysmans had observed in *Là-bas*, comparing the unstable admixture of rationalism and occultism at the end of the Enlightenment to the resurgence of mysticism at the close of his own positivistic century. In *Against Nature*, he had in turn rhymed the invasion of Europe by the Huns in the late fifth century with the *Götterdämmerung* of the fin de siècle, thereby canonizing a standard analogy



between the decline and fall of Rome and modern decadence.<sup>3</sup> In *Saint Lydwine*, it is the waning of the Middle Ages in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries that now provides the distant mirror to the present — Catholic Europe in the malignant grip of the powers of darkness, poised at the brink of the twin abysses of the Reformation and the Renaissance.

The hagiography opens with an apocalyptic panorama of a continent torn asunder, its church reeling from corruption and heresy, its papacy riven by the Great Schism, its thrones occupied by a medley of mad and ineffectual monarchs, its nations devoured by civil wars, its populations decimated by wave after wave of bubonic plague spewed forth “from the infernal cesspools of the Levant.” This vast tableau of the agony of Europe (largely lifted from Jules Michelet’s *La Sorcière*) is in turn echoed in the book’s epilogue — devoted to a nosology of the present, in which syphilis, hysteria, and microbial infection function as the modern-day equivalents of the black death. Such epidemiological metaphors of course provide the common currency of many fin-de-siècle diagnoses of the malady of modernity; Max Simon Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892), for example, construes degeneration as a contemporary form of the plague, just as the discourses of Charcot and Pasteur are continually haunted by the specter of contagion.<sup>4</sup> Huysmans’s willfully gonzo brand of fundamentalist Catholicism, however, allows him to move beyond mere metaphor — or so he believes — into an absolutely literal theological reading of the sickness of the contemporary world. “The twentieth century therefore has begun as the preceding one ended in France,” he informs his readers at the close of *Saint Lydwine*: “the infernal disease has erupted, the struggle is on between Lucifer and God” — a transparent allusion to the diabolical scourge of the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>5</sup>

No less than late medieval Europe, then, the present day provides the faithful with the spectacle of the Christological body of the church crucified by its archenemies. Abandoning Catholic homiletics for political pamphleteering, Huysmans lapses into the idiom of anti-Dreyfusard propaganda at its most virulent:

Austria is gnawed to the marrow by Jewish vermin; Italy has become a nest of Freemasons, a demonical sink of iniquity in the strict sense of the term; Spain and Portugal are also being ripped to shreds by the fangs of the Lodges; only little Belgium seem less rotten to the core, its faith less rancid, its soul more robust. As for the nation most favored by Christ, namely France, she has been assaulted, nearly strangled, kicked about, dragged



through the mire by the scum that is bankrolled by miscreants. To carry out this foul task, Freemasonry has unleashed upon us the ravenous pack of Protestants and Israelites.<sup>6</sup>

Given this obscene state of affairs, he concludes, "never till now has there been such need of a Lydwine, for only a figure such as she will be fit to appease the certain anger of the Judge and serve as a shelter against the cataclysms now in the making."<sup>7</sup> Divinely chosen to suffer "in order that they may neutralize the demoniacal abominations of our day," propitiatory victims such as Lydwine provide the only hope for that immense work of expiation and purgation necessary to cleanse Europe of its evil Other. Huysmans's medievalistic logic of sacrifice, largely rhetorical in 1901, chillingly portends a century of holocausts to come.

Huysmans's master in the art of hagiography (as in nearly everything else) was Flaubert — not only the Flaubert of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (Des Esseintes's favorite among his works) or *The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaler*, but also, and perhaps more profoundly, the author of *A Simple Heart* and *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Huysmans's early fiction explores the tragicomic trials and tribulations of a series of modern-day martyrs whose agonies are all the more gratuitous in that they rarely rise above the mundane. The sufferings of the hapless bachelors André and Cyprien, of the dyspeptic Folantin, of the Melvillian scrivener Bougran, of the neurasthenic Des Esseintes, are all unrelieved by the slightest possibility of redemption or grace. With his keen black humorist's eye for the daily misadventures of the flesh and the spirit, Huysmans is content to present his characters as Flaubertian studies in futility — unacknowledged saints of the inane.

It is only with his novel *Là-bas* (1891) that Huysmans, rejecting naturalism for supernaturalism, explicitly shifts his literary sights from the secular to the sacred. Its central protagonist, the novelist-historian Durtal, a dabbler in damnation and thinly disguised alter ego of the author himself, spends a good portion of the novel working on a hagiography, but typically enough, it is a hagiography *à rebours*: the grisly tale of the satanist and serial killer Gilles de Rais, exact contemporary (and negative image) of Joan of Arc and Saint Lydwine. Alchemist, bibliophile and aesthete (Huysmans dubs him "the Des Esseintes of the fifteenth century"), Gilles de Rais's quest for the absolute leads him into a orgy of crime whose scenes of sadistic torture are reminiscent both of Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* and Mirbeau's *The Torture*



*Garden*.<sup>8</sup> As in Georges Bataille's or Michel Tournier's twentieth-century handlings of this same Bluebeard legend,<sup>9</sup> *Là-bas* portrays the ogre Gilles de Rais as an allegory of the Baudelairean reversibility of opposites: his gluttonous descent into evil is merely a measure of his immense appetite for the Good — as is borne out by his eventual conversion and rebirth in Christ. Huysmans comments, "merely a step separates the exaltations of mysticism from the exasperations of satanism. In the world beyond, everything meets."<sup>10</sup>

A similar (Nietzschean) transvaluation of values is a work in the celebrated description of Grünewald's Karlsruhe Crucifixion in the first chapter of *Là-bas* — a painting Bataille would later reproduce in his *Erotism* in order to illustrate Christianity's fundamental misprision of the "saintliness of transgression," that is, of the role of sacrifice in the heterological economy of the sacred.<sup>11</sup> The passage is worth reproducing at length, for it provides the initial example of the kind of "mystical naturalism" (Huysmans's term for Grünewald's proto-expressionist aesthetic) that will subsequently govern his unrelenting depiction of the sufferings of Saint Lydwine:

Dislocated, almost torn from their shoulders, the arms of the Christ seemed to be shackled over their entire length by the strained cords of the muscles. The broken armpits were cracking; the hands, spread open, brandished haggard fingers that still offered benediction, in a confused gesture of prayer and reproach; the pectoral muscles were trembling, buttered with sweat; the torso was grooved with circular trenches by the protruding rib cage; the flesh was swollen, rotten, and blue, sprinkled with flea bites, speckled, as from pinpricks, by splinters broken off from the rods of the scourges that had larded the skin here and there with subcutaneous thorns. The hour of sanies had come; the fluvial wound in the side, running more thickly, inundated the hip with a blood similar to the dark juice of mulberries; reddish serosities, milky liquids, water resembling gray Moselle wine oozed from the chest and soaked the stomach, under which undulated a seething loincloth; next, the knees, forced together, knocked their rotulae, and the twisted lower legs formed a hollow space down to the feet which, placed one on top of the other, were stretched out, ready to putrefy completely, turning green amidst a flow of blood....<sup>12</sup>

This is indeed a Christ pictured in what Bataille would term a state of "sovereignty" — sacred to the very extent that his grisly "cadaver in eruption" inspires the kind of awestruck repulsion felt in the presence



of any object or event so transgressive, so taboo as to threaten the very limits of logic and representation.

Even as Huysmans attempts to provide a graphically ekphrastic reproduction of Grünewald's painting, his descriptive virtuosity is continually undermined by the tropological drift of metaphor. In a lurid parody of the edible, eucharistic body of Christ, the crucifixion scene is surrealistically transformed into a recipe straight out of Brillat-Savarin. Splayed and trussed on the spit of the Cross like a piece of poultry, Huysmans's *faisandé* Christ is "battered," "larded," and *persillé* in preparation for roasting, his carrion providing the *pièce de résistance* of a putrescent banquet that includes dairy products (*des petits laits*), dessert (mulberry juice), and Moselle wine.<sup>13</sup> In a kind of self-destructive process, the expiring Christ passes from raw to cooked, from nature to culture, from fallen flesh to reborn spirit, even as food, the very sustainer of life, is at the same time revealed to be a nauseating aliment of death and decay. Commenting on the scissiparity of Grünewald's treatment of the Crucifixion — the most gruesome realism tensed against extreme idealization — Huysmans observes that he had thereby managed to open up that gap, that space of excess in which, according to Bataille, the sacred appears: "He had gone to the two extremes and had managed to extract from this triumphantly stinking piece of garbage the most exquisite menthol of spiritual love, the most stinging distillate of tears. This canvas revealed the masterpiece of an art inexorably compelled to render at once the tangible and the invisible, to make manifest the crying impurity of the flesh, to sublimate the infinite distress of the soul."<sup>14</sup>

The Karlsruhe Crucifixion, by all accounts, struck Huysmans with the force of a revelation when he first saw it in Germany in 1888. *Saint Lydwine* represents his attempt ten years later to transpose the "primitive" art of Grünewald into the narrative framework of decadent hagiography — much as Flaubert had tried to mime the stained-glass windows of the Rouen Cathedral in his minimalist rewriting of the legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaler. Descended from a line of Dutch painters on his father's side (hence his rejection of his given name, Charles-Marie-Georges, in favor of the more Nordic *nom de plume* Joris-Karl), Huysmans uses the stigmatized flesh of Lydwine as an inspiration for a bravura display of *ut pictura poesis* that includes Bosch, Breughel, Van Eyck, and, perhaps most tellingly, the entire Northern European tradition of still lives — for as Léon Bloy shrewdly observed, Huysmans was incapable of painting anything other than *natures mortes*.<sup>15</sup>



Working like a taxidermist, Huysmans spends some 250 pages methodically dissecting and emptying out his saint's mortal frame, sublimating it into a perfect body without organs. This process of disincarnation, this hollowing out of all that is threateningly female or interior, can however only take place through the spectacular exhibition of the organic: given the logic of fetishism, the evacuation of the real paradoxically depends on the obsessive rehearsal and display of what it lacks.<sup>16</sup> Poring over various hagiographical sources, Huysmans discovered in the Passion of Lydwine the perfect vehicle for this fantasmatic revenge on female nature, for perhaps more than any other figure in the annals of the saints it had been her special mission to become a worker bee in "the hive of pain" (p. 1055), a "victim ground in God's mortar" (p. 1051), a "fruit of suffering pressed by God until the very last drop had been extracted."<sup>17</sup>

True to her name (which Huysmans derives from the Dutch *lyden*, to suffer or forbear), the mortifications of this "female Job" last thirty-eight years. The victim of a skating accident at age fifteen, she fractured a rib and developed a tumor that erupted inside of her, causing pus and vomit to pour from her mouth. From this point onward, her body became the sacred locus for an ever-mounting series of pollutions and afflictions which would eventually include virtually every malady known to the Middle Ages — with the exception of leprosy (which, considered incurable, "would have counteracted the Savior's design and rendered the development of Lydwine's holiness impossible"). Huysman's deadpan descriptions of her Calvary read like perverse *blasons du corps féminin*, their lurid naturalism lensed through the icy sensibility of a Sade or Sacher-Masoch:

The wound under her rib, which had never healed, swelled up and gangrene set in. The putrefaction bred worms, which crawled under the skin of her stomach and spread over three ulcers.

... [A] tumor appeared on her shoulder and festered. It was the dreaded plague of the Middle Ages, the Saint Anthony's fire which attacked her right arm and consumed the flesh to the bone. Her nerves were all twisted and splintered, except for one that held her arm and prevented it from becoming detached from her trunk. From now on it was impossible for Lydwine to turn herself to this side, and only her left arm remained free to raise her head, which was rotting in turn. Violent neuralgic pains assailed her, boring into her temples like a brace and pounding her skull like a mallet. Her forehead split apart from the roots of her hair to the center of her nose; her chin dropped away under her lower lip and her mouth swelled;



her right eye was extinguished, and the other became so sensitive that the slightest light caused it to bleed. She also suffered from violent toothaches, which sometimes raged for weeks on end and rendered her half mad; and finally, after a severe inflammation of the throat, which suffocated her, she lost blood through her mouth, ears, and nose in such profusion that the bed was dripping with it (pp. 1032, 1034).

And so on, for page after page, until Lydwine in the end is reduced to "a thing without form," a living corpse immobilized from the neck down, a consciousness without a body — Beckett's Winnie *avant la lettre*.

Much as Huysmans's poetics of decomposition are indebted to the shock aesthetic of Baudelaire's "Une Charogne" or "Une Martyre," *Saint Lydwine* remains in many respects closer to the more traditional allegorical intentions of the baroque. As Walter Benjamin observes, "That which lies in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the piece of rubble, is, in fact, the noblest material of baroque creation. For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification."<sup>18</sup> Virtually all of Huysmans's works could be said involve this kind of baroque apotheosis of detritus and debris, but what sets his treatment of Lydwine off from his other meditations on ruins is the explicitly salvational theology that frames its allegorical vision of mortal disaggregation and decay. For Huysmans the recent convert has an urgent need to believe in miracles — as his *Les Foules de Lourdes* (1906) amply demonstrates — and Lydwine, after all, is saved: her foul excretions finally transmuted into Christological gold through *l'alchimie de la douleur*, her putrescent wounds now smelling as sweetly as "thuribles of perfume"; at her death she leaves her hideous deformities behind to "become what she had been before her illnesses, fresh and fair, young and plump . . . a girl of seventeen, smiling in her sleep" (p. 1059). This is the redemptive *Umkehr*, or reversal (notably absent in Baudelaire's Catholicism), that Benjamin describes near the close of his study of the *Trauerspiel*: "Ultimately in the death signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem. . . . With this *one* about-turn . . . the immersion of allegory clears away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, rediscovers itself, not playful in the earthly world of things, but serious, under the eyes of heaven."<sup>19</sup>



"I will admit that writing *Saint Lydwine* was an act of penance for me," Huysmans confessed on the completion of his hagiography. "It was the literary equivalent of fasting."<sup>20</sup> Even by the arid standards of his other postconversion works — in which he leaves the traditional forms of the novel behind in order to engage in a laborious encyclopedic cataloguing of the archives of medieval Christianity — *Saint Lydwine* is a very thin work indeed. Stripped of plot, devoid of psychological depth, the bare bones of its narrative structure exhibited like some sort of baroque skeleton, it is a text that penitentially rehearses its refusal to move beyond documentary paraphrase into artistic invention: Huysmans for the most part limits himself to compiling and composting his hagiographical source-texts (Jan Garlac, Thomas à Kempis, Jan Brugman) and, to round out the volume, provides a guided tour to the Dutch town of Schiedam and capsule biographies of some forty "victims of reparation" across the ages, copied directly out of Dr. Imbert-Gourbeyre's then-recent work, *La Stigmatisation* — shades of Bouvard and Pécuchet.

Meager though the literary merits of his "montrosity" seemed to him, Huysmans nonetheless insisted on the didactic benefits of his paean to pain, for *Saint Lydwine* was above all intended to illustrate his theory of "mystical substitution" — a rather unorthodox article of faith he had picked up from his "doctor of the soul," the renegade Abbé Boullan. His clearest statement of this doctrine occurs in a 1900 letter addressed to an invalid woman who had written to him for spiritual succor and guidance:

It is quite certain that humanity is governed by two laws of which it knows little or nothing: the law of solidarity in evil and the law of reversibility in good; solidarity in Adam, reversibility in Our Lord. In other words, everyone is responsible to a certain extent for the sins of others and must to a certain extent expiate them; and everyone can also attribute the virtues he possesses or acquires to those who possess none or can acquire none. God was the first to submit to these laws when he applied them to himself in the person of his Son, allowing Jesus to pay the ransom of others in order that his virtues, which were of no use to him since he was innocent and perfect, should profit the sinners who could not otherwise attain virtue. He wished Jesus to give the first example of mystical substitution — the substitution of one who owes nothing for one who owes everything — and Jesus in turn wishes certain souls to accept the legacy of his sacrifice and, in the words of St. Paul, to complete what is lacking in his Passion. For in fact, Christ could no longer suffer by himself after his Crucifixion. His



mission was fulfilled with the shedding of his blood; and if he wishes to continue suffering here on earth, he can do this only in the members of his mystical body. . . .<sup>21</sup>

This exemplary work of suffering, he continues, is assigned to saints and members of contemplative orders who function as the elected "lightning rods" for all the miseries and evils of the world. Lydwine's *imitatio Christi* demonstrates the consoling truth that "one is never nearer to God, and never more accessible to his influence, than when one is in pain."

Commenting on the central importance of the Crucifixion to Christianity, Elaine Scarry observes in *The Body in Pain*: "The self-flagellation of the religious ascetic is not (as often asserted) an act of denying the body, eliminating its claims from attention, but a way of so emphasizing the body that the contents of the world are cancelled and the path is clear for the entry of an unwordly, contentless force."<sup>22</sup> Her description of the effects of torture is equally germane to the harrowing of Saint Lydwine — though as a mystic the latter experiences the torments visited on her by Christ the Bridegroom as sexual ecstasy: "Intense pain destroys a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject."<sup>23</sup>

Pain, then, provides Lydwine with a pathway to the *au-delà* — beyond self, beyond representation, beyond language. Yet, paradoxically enough, Huysmans's doctrine of mystical substitution is couched in terms that all allude to the specifically linguistic operations of metaphor — Mallarmé's symbolist *démon de l'analogie* taken to such an extreme as to dissolve theology into a version of sympathetic magic far closer to the workings of occultism or voodoo than to official Christian dogma.<sup>24</sup> Given the sheer transferability or translatability of virtue or vice from any individual to another, good and evil cease to have any ethical mooring and become mere shifters in an immense network of correspondences. In this world of mystic substitution, which hinges (as René Girard has argued) on the paradigmatic homology of scapegoats, anything can therefore potentially stand for anything else, just as the mechanism of reversibility potentially renders everything the same.<sup>25</sup> Grounded as it is in the notion of generalized mimesis — the imitation



of Christ — the very contagion of the mimetic in Huysmans's doctrine of propitiatory victimage threatens to create a phantasmagoria of repetition which generates a proliferation of mere simulacrae, a multiplication of copies with no originals — precisely the enigma of simulation that Charcot confronted in his star patient, Augustine.<sup>26</sup>

As Charles Bernheimer has suggested, not only do the mimetic stigmata of Huysmans's saint bear an uncanny resemblance to the experimentally induced symptoms of the hysterics of the Salpêtrière, but in a more general sense she may be read as an incarnation of that other nineteenth-century figure of female disease, disorder, and metaphoricity — the prostitute.<sup>27</sup> Quite literally a putrid woman (or *putain*), Lydwine is an infinitely receptive sewer whose hygienic mission it is to drain off all the evil of the earth — hence Huysmans's obsessive recourse to imagery involving exudation and secretion, for the more her body suppurates and bleeds, the more sins are washed away.<sup>28</sup> The particular law governing her entropy — waste converted into conservation, loss into gain — is what allows her (as Huysmans puts it) to “complete” or to “supplement” (*suppléer*) that which is “lacking” in the Passion. Functioning both as Christ's female body double and as a phallic prosthesis that repairs what is most crucially missing from his flesh, Lydwine's androgyny is wonderfully contrived to allay the anxieties of fin-de-siècle fetichism: by “nailing herself to the empty place of Jesus on the Cross,” she provides a triumphant, indeed supernatural, denial of castration.<sup>29</sup>

In a France fantasized by Huysmans as ever more at the mercy of *la haute banque juive*, the doctrine of mystical substitution also provides him with a model of sacred economy that runs counter to contemporary capitalism.<sup>30</sup> If, as the above-quoted letter indicates, Christ pays the “ransom” that “profits” other sinners, God having decided to substitute “one who owes nothing for one who owes everything,” so Lydwine goes ever deeper into debt in order to build up the collective credit of Christendom — a striking reversal of the standard laws of accounting. At other moments, Huysmans draws on more traditional eleemosynary imagery: “The wounds of [Christ's] hands are purses always empty, and he stretches them out that each may fill them with the small change of his sufferings and his tears.”<sup>31</sup> The devout Léon Bloy, for one, was horrified by what he took to be the shopkeeper mentality of these pecuniary metaphors, though in all fairness this vision of Christ's body as a kind of mutual fund — or currency — that operates on the gold standard of Golgotha should probably be read as a typically outlandish parody of the workings of international finance. For the



real economy of mystical substitution lies elsewhere — not in accumulation, not in investment, not in the balance sheet of profit and loss, but rather in the sheer exorbitance of sacrificial expenditure. As *Saint Lydwine's* example makes eloquently clear, it is only by becoming utterly spendthrift of one's self and body, only by squandering oneself in the *jouissance* of sacred prostitution, that true Christian charity is achieved — a gift without return, a holy potlatch of pain.

In *Là-bas*, Durtal brags that he has invented a new sin unknown to the Church Fathers — namely, “Pygmalionism,” an exquisite commixture of “cerebral onanism” and incest:

Imagine an artist falling in love with his child, with his creation — with an Hérodiade, a Judith, a Helen, a Jeanne d'Arc, whom he has either described or painted — and evoking her and finally possessing her in dream.

Well, this kind of love is worse than regular incest. . . . In incest there is a quasi-natural, almost legitimate side to things, involving as it does another person, whereas in Pygmalionism the father violates the daughter of his soul, the sole being that is purely and truly his, to which he alone can give birth without the aid of another. The offense is thus entire and complete. And moreover, does it not also entail a disdain for nature, that is, of the work of God, given that the object of the sin is no longer, as is the case even in bestiality, a tangible living being, but instead an unreal creature, a being created by a projection of desecrated talent, a being very nearly celestial since, by genius, by artistry, it often becomes immortal? Let us go further if you wish. Suppose that an artist paints a saint and becomes enamored of him. This would further complicate things by adding crime against nature and sacrilege. What an enormity!<sup>32</sup>

Despite its pious tenor, *Saint Lydwine* continually verges on this kind of sacrilege (which may explain why, like *The Cathedral*, it narrowly escaped being placed on the Index). The only work of Huysmans's with a single female subject at its center, it is also his most profoundly autobiographical text, a sustained acting out of the incestuous scenarios of father and daughter, mother and son, in which the author hermaphroditically manages to occupy all positions at once.

“Je suis la plaie et le couteau” (I am both knife and wound), Baudelaire writes in “L'Héautontimorouménos,” anatomizing the kind of sado-masochistic reversibility at work in *Saint Lydwine*. Playing Pygmalion to her Galatea (or Prometheus to her Pandora), Huysmans sculpts the excremental clay of his saint's body into virile gold — “the



gold, that is to say the love, which arises from the brazier of suffering and which alone is the true philosopher's stone."<sup>33</sup> As this alchemical metaphor suggests, however, this process of recomposition can only take place if the female elements of Nature have been artfully decomposed by pain. Directly applying the scalpel of his pen to her body, the demiurgic artist stamps his stigmata on her flesh, shaping her illegible chaos into the authoritative text of Scripture — not unlike the workings of the Harrow in Kafka's *Penal Colony*.<sup>34</sup>

But even as he wields the scourge of the torturer, so Huysmans also willingly offers himself up as sacrificial victim, his sullied flesh hungry for the chastening marks of divine inscription. Mystically substituting himself for Lydwine, imitating her imitation, as it were, he will spend the final years of his life racked by a particularly gruesome case of oral cancer, complicated by shingles, tumors, and partial blindness. The last letter he writes toward the end of this excruciating *via dolorosa* triumphantly assumes the persona of his Dutch saint. His mouth, hollowed out by abscesses, is now at last ready to become a vessel of the Word:

My life drags on, with influenza added to the rest. I'm not sleeping or eating, but just manufacturing abscesses to the accompaniment of never-ending toothache. Anyone who had no faith or a pennyworth of courage would have blown his brains out long ago. Well, I'm not unhappy. The day I said *fiat*, God give me incredible strength of will and wonderful peace of mind. I am not unhappy. I do not wish to be cured, but to continue to be purified so that Our Lady may take me above.<sup>35</sup>

---

#### NOTES

1. Since Huysmans's grotesquely anti-Semitic account of his visit to Frankfurt in his 1905 text has not, to my knowledge, ever been translated into English, it is worth quoting *in extenso*. The Jew here functions as the caricatural Other of the various portraits of Christ and the Virgin Mary which Huysmans describes in *Trois primitifs*, his museum guide to the painters Mathias Grünewald, the master of Flémalle, and Bartolomeo Veneto:

Frankfurt is the international capital and the monetary market of the tribes, the metropolis of stockjobbery, the city that issues marching orders to all the sanhedrins and Masonic lodges: this city, birthplace of the Rothschild clan, is also the very place



where Bismarck put his pen to the dismembering of France. Though destroyed in Palestine, a wretched parody of the Temple has now been rebuilt here; and this New Jerusalem, still obstinate and legalistic, continues to pit itself against Christ.

Being Catholic, one truly wonders what on earth one is doing in these parts, different though they may be from the standard *Judengassen* of other nations. Indeed, the place bears little resemblance to Amsterdam's Foelistraat, a lazaretto that features, as it were, the classic Hebrew types, the men and women recognizable by their full heads of kinky hair, their rheumy eyes, their noses like tapir snouts, their gaping lips, their damascene foreheads dusted by the flour of dandruff.

Frankfurt, however, is no such slum embellished by ophthalmic ailments and skin diseases. The specimens of the immiscible race are less tainted and more varied here: they are the cosmopolitans of Judea. In addition to the familiar image of young brown- or blond-haired bucks whose flushed faces seem puffed up by their excessive intake of mercury pills, the branches of the black- or carrot-haired family also abound: faces with shocks of kelp hair, bulldog muzzles, screech-owl eyes, cheeks modeled out of tallow and pink pomade, and chinless blubber-lipped mouths may be found side by side with more angular visages whose rust-colored forelocks dangle down, whose beards are sparse, whose eyes, the texture of orgeat syrup or gelatin, bulge out, and whose hooked noses curve downward, nearly severing the huge hang of their lower lips. . . .

On the other hand, there are those who barely display the stigmata of these immemorial features, and one has to examine them quite closely in order to recognize the marks of a race that, now stripped of its rags and washed and combed, nonetheless betrays itself by its taste for flashy clothes, its addiction to trinkets, its infatuation with rings. Showiness replaces the filth of yore, and musk covers up the traditional smell of the tribe, a smell compounded of the sickly fetor of ulcers and the acrid stench of wool grease. (*Trois primitifs* [Paris: Flammarion, 1966], pp. 47–48.)

2. Although Huysmans claims Lydwina was officially canonized in 1890, Pope Leo did no more than formally confirm her cult at this date. See Christopher Lloyd, *J.-K. Huysmans and the Fin-de-Siècle Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 134. Taking her to be one of his fictional characters rather than an historical personage, I retain Huysmans's French spelling of her name throughout.

3. See Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), pp. 99–109.

4. See Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie* (Paris: Macula, 1982); Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). Spackman's book also contains a discussion of D'Annunzio's "La vergine Orsala" and "La vergine Anna" which casts further light on the genre of decadent hagiography.



5. Huysmans observes in *L'Oblat*: "Durtal had always been struck by the clearly demoniacal character of the Dreyfus Affair; he considered it a springboard erected by the Jews and Protestants, the better to lunge at the throat of the church and strangle it." *L'Oblat* (Paris: Christian Pirot, 1992), p. 171 [my translation].

6. *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam*, trans. Agnes Hastings (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1979 [1923]), p. 218 [translation modified]. All subsequent page references in parentheses will be drawn from this English edition excerpted in this volume. Those passages not appearing in this reader will be noted, though with frequent modifications of the 1923 Hastings translation.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

8. Huysmans praises Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* in an 1885 letter for their "comic lyricism," their "bloody rage reminiscent of the Marquis de Sade," their "hymn to homosexuality," and their "nightmares à la Redon," adding that "the screwing of the female shark by the man is stupifying and there is a disemboweling, liver and heart, through a vagina that is quite appetitizing." This latter allusion to the second strophe of the third canto of *Maldoror* may well be the earliest literary seed of *Saint Lydwine*. *The Road from Decadence: Selected Letters of J.K. Huysmans*, trans. Barbara Beaumont (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989).

9. See Georges Bataille, *Le Procès de Gilles de Rais* (Paris: Pauvert, 1965); Michel Tournier, *Le Roi des aulnes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), *Le Vent paraclet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), *Gilles et Jean* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983). Artaud apparently also considered doing a theater of cruelty staging of the life of Gilles de Rais. While working on *Saint Lydwine* at Ligugé, Huysmans wrote a second — and considerably bowdlerized — version of the same story, "Gilles de Rais, La Magie en Poitou" (1899).

10. Huysmans, *Là-bas* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1988), p. 69 [my translation].

11. Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1957), pp. 99 and 145.

12. I quote (with slight modifications) Charles Bernheimer's translation of this passage in his *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 239–41.

13. See Jean Borie, *Huysmans: Le Diable, le célibataire et Dieu* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), pp. 150–56.

14. Huysmans, *Là-bas*, p. 25.

15. Léon Bloy, *Sur Huysmans* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1986), p. 68.

16. See Alain Buisine, "Le Taxidermiste," *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 43 (April–September 1978), pp. 59–68, and Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, pp. 249–51.

17. *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam*, p. 207.

18. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), p. 178 [translation modified]. See also Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La Raison baroque de Baudelaire à Benjamin* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1984).

19. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 232–33 [translation modified].

20. *The Road from Decadence*, p. 207.



21. Quoted in Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 290–91.

22. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 34.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

24. See Lloyd, *J.-K. Huysmans*, pp. 114–42.

25. René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972).

26. Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie*, pp. 163–66.

27. Bernheimer, p. 255. Janet Beizer's *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994) suggests further perspectives on Huysmans's hagiography and the case histories of Charcot and Freud.

28. See Robert Ziegler, "From Body Magic to 'Divine Alchemy': Analogy and Sublimation in J.-K. Huysmans," *Orbis Literarum* 44 (1989), pp. 312–26.

29. See Jean-Luc Steinmetz, "Sang sens," *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 43 (April–September, 1978), pp. 87–88, and Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, p. 251.

30. Huysmans observes in a 1901 letter: "Zola's inventions in *L'Argent* are nothing compared to people like Herz and Reinach and Jewish bankers." *The Road to Decadence*, p. 209. As early as his novel *Là-bas*, struck by the "supernatural" enigma of money, Huysmans is haunted by the "diabolical" or "occult" workings of capital — the economic equivalent of the obscene mysteries of the Black Mass. See *Là-bas*, pp. 26–27.

31. *Saint Lydwine*, p. 222.

32. *Là-bas*, p. 209. Huysmans explicitly alludes to the Pygmalion myth in a 1900 letter, where he writes, "I have my hands covered in the pale putty of the life of St. Lydwine." *The Road to Decadence*, p. 178.

33. *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam*, p. 222.

34. I take these points from Steinmetz, "Sans sens," pp. 83–86.

35. Quoted in Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, p. 347.



## CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER II</b>	.....	<b>1025</b>
<b>III</b>	.....	<b>1029</b>
<b>IV</b>	.....	<b>1037</b>
<b>V</b>	.....	<b>1049</b>
<b>XIV</b>	.....	<b>1053</b>



# SAINT LYDWINE OF SCHIEDAM

by J.-K. Huysmans

*Deus carni illius saepe dolores infligit, quatenus Spiritus  
Sanctus ibi habitare possit.*

— Sancta Hildegardis, *Vita*, lib. ii.

## CHAPTER II

Lydwine was born in Holland, in Schiedam near The Hague, on Palm Sunday, the day after the feast of Saint Gertrude, in the year of Our Lord 1380.

Her father, Pierre, was the town's night watchman by trade, and her mother, Petronille, came from Ketel, a village near Schiedam. They were both descendants of families that, after enjoying some prosperity, had become poor. Pierre's ancestors, who should have belonged to the nobility, were, according to à Kempis, valiant soldiers. We possess no other precise details of their lineage, for the historians of the saint tell us only of Pierre's father, Joannes, described as a pious man who prayed night and day, ate meat only on Sundays, fasted twice a week, and made do with a little bread and water on Saturdays. He lost his wife at the age of forty and was obstinately assailed by Satan. His dwelling underwent the usual phenomena of haunted houses; the Devil shook it from top to bottom, drove away all the servants, and broke the dishes, without, however, as Gerlac oddly enough observes, spilling the butter contained in the broken pots.

His son Pierre had nine children with his wife, Petronille; one daughter, Lydwine, who was the fourth child, and eight sons, two of whom have been mentioned by the biographers, one, Baudouin, by name only, the other, Wilhelm, appears several times in his sister's history. He married and had a daughter who bore her grandmother's name, Petronille, and a son named after his uncle Baudouin.

If we further mention a cousin, Nicolas, who appears twice in the background of this narrative, and one other relative, Gerlac the writer, who, though he was a monk, lived for a long time in the saint's house



for reasons we do not know, we have given, I think, all that the old texts tell us of the family.

The day Lydwine was born, her mother, who did not believe she was about to give birth, had gone to High Mass, but she went into labor and had to rush home. Her child was born on the Feast of Palms just as they were singing the Passion of Our Savior according to Saint Matthew in the church. Her delivery was painless and easy, although the births of her other children had been so laborious she had nearly died.

At her baptism the child received the name of Lydwine, or Lydwyd, Lydwich, Liedwich, Lidie, or Liduvine, a name that, in all its different spellings and pronunciations, is derived from the Flemish word *lyden*, "to suffer," and, according to Brugman, signifies "great patience" in German.

Her biographers observe that both her name and the time of her birth during the festival were prophetic.

With the exception of one illness, which we shall discuss, we have no details about her early childhood worthy of note. Gerlac, Brugman, and à Kempis fill the interval between infancy and her later years with edifying notes on the child's devotion to the Blessed Virgin of Schiedam, represented by a statue whose history is as follows:

Shortly before Lydwine was born, a sculptor (according to Gerlac and à Kempis) or merchant (according to Brugman) came to Schiedam with a Virgin made of wood, which he had either carved himself or bought, and was planning to sell it at the fair held in Antwerp around the date of the Assumption. This statue was so light that a man could easily carry it; yet, when placed in the boat that was to transport it between the two towns, it suddenly became so heavy that it was impossible for the vessel to leave the port. More than twenty sailors tried to draw it from its moorings, while the crowd observing this spectacle from the quay laughed and jeered at their impotence. Mortified, they exhausted themselves, and never having been in such an awkward situation, they ended up wondering whether this effigy of the Madonna might not possibly be the cause. In any case, they wanted to put an end to this embarrassment, and threatened the merchant with being tossed overboard, so he took back the statue, which immediately became light in his hands, and unloaded it amid the acclamations of the crowd, while the lightened boat sailed out to sea.

After this, everyone cried that the Virgin had acted in this way because she wished to remain among them and, consequently, they ought to keep her. They went to fetch the parish priests and the members of the trade guilds, who immediately bought the statue and placed it in the church, where they founded a brotherhood in its honor.



It is not surprising that Lydwine, who had surely been rocked to sleep to this story, had from her earliest years loved to pray before the statue. Unable to go see it in the evening, when canticles and hymns were sung on bended knee before the Altar of Our Lady, she arranged to visit it during the day, though not as frequently as she would have liked, for her life was never idle.

Indeed, when she was seven years old she became her mother's servant, and it was difficult for her to find time to pray and turn her thoughts to God. Thus, she took advantage of the mornings when Petronille sent her to deliver lunch to her brothers at school, to do her errand as quickly as possible and find time on her way home to say a Hail Mary in the church. Once when she was late and her mother, displeased, asked her which road she had taken, she replied naively: "Do not scold me, Mother Dear, I went to pay my respects to Our Lady the Virgin, and she returned my greeting with a smile."

Petronille became thoughtful; she knew her child was incapable of lying and of so pure a soul that God inspired her and kept her from illusion, so she remained silent, and from that moment on, tolerated her slight unpunctualities without too much grumbling.

Her childhood was spent helping her mother, who, with eight other children and the little money her husband's trade brought in, had a hard time making ends meet. As she grew older, she became a skilled housekeeper, and at twelve she was a serious girl, rarely interested in joining in the games of her friends and neighbors or in sharing in their amusements and dances; in fact, she was comfortable only when alone. Without insisting, without yet emphasizing His touch, without speaking His inner language, God had already drawn her to Himself, letting her vaguely know that she was His alone.

She obeyed without understanding, without even suspecting the life of agony that lay before her, and into which she must soon enter.

One indication of her future flared up the day when more than one young man of the village asked for her hand in marriage. She was at that time attractive and well-formed, endowed with that special beauty of the fair-haired Flemish girl, a beauty whose charm lies chiefly in the candor of her features, the gracious artlessness of her laugh, and the expression of tender seriousness and permanent surprise in her eyes. Among the aspirants, some were of fortune and family far superior to her own. Pierre, her father, could not help but rejoice at this unexpected good fortune and insisted that his daughter make her choice; but suddenly she understood that she must vow her virginity to Christ, and she flatly refused to listen to her father, who persisted.



"If you wish to force me," she cried, "I will obtain some repulsive deformity from my Lord that will put all these suitors to flight!"

As Pierre, who did not like to admit defeat, returned again to the attack, her mother intervened and said: "See, my dear, she is too young to think of marriage and too pious for it to suit her; as she wishes to offer herself to God, let us at least give her with good grace."

In the end they resigned themselves to her wishes, but she remained uneasy with the knowledge of her own beauty, and while waiting to become ugly, as she wished to be, she went out as little as possible. She now understood that any love bestowed on a creature is a fraud committed against God, and she implored Jesus to help her to love Him alone.

Then He began to cultivate her, to root out all thoughts that could displease Him, to weed her soul, to rake it till the blood flowed. And He did more; as though to attest the justice of Saint Hildegarde's saying, at once so terrible and so consoling: "God dwells not in bodies that are whole," He attacked her health. This young and charming flesh with which He had clothed her seemed suddenly irksome to Him, and He cut it and opened it up in every direction, so that He might better seize and mold the soul it contained. He enlarged this poor body, giving it the terrible capacity of engulfing all the ills of the earth and burning them in the furnace of its expiatory tortures.

Toward the end of her fifteenth year she was hardly recognizable, and then, like an eagle of love, God threw Himself upon His prey. The legend of Saint Isadore of Seville and Vincent de Beauvais of the eagle that seizes its young in its claws and flies with them toward the sun, where they must gaze without flinching at the fiery disk under pain of being dropped, was verified in Lydwine. Without flinching, she faced the sun of justice; and the symbol of Jesus, fisher of souls, replaced her gently in His aerie, where her soul grew and flourished in its shell of flesh, which was destined to become, before her burial, something monstrous, without form and unknowable.

Behind her, outlined on the far-off heights, is the grand figure of Job weeping on his dung hill. She is his daughter; and the same scenes are carried down through the ages, from the borders of Idumea to the shores of the Meuse, scenes of irreducible suffering borne with inexhaustible patience and aggravated by the discussions of pitiless friends and by the reproaches of even her own family. There is this difference, however; the trials of the Patriarch ended during his lifetime, while those of his descendant ceased only with her death.



## CHAPTER III

Until her fifteenth year, Lydwine seems to have been fairly healthy. Her biographers only tell us that during her early years she contracted gravel and expelled several stones; but neither Gerlac, nor Brugman, nor à Kempis, speak of any childhood diseases she contracted. It was not, indeed, till nearly the end of her fifteenth year that the fury of her heavenly Spouse's love fell upon her.

She then had an illness that did not in fact endanger her life but left her in a state of weakness that none of the medicines prescribed by the doctors and apothecaries of that time succeeded in curing. She became astonishingly feeble and languished, her cheeks were hollow and her flesh melted away. She became so thin that she was only skin and bones; the comeliness of her features disappeared in the protuberances and hollows of a face that, from pink and white, turned greenish, then ashen. Her wishes had been granted; she was as ugly as a corpse. Her suitors rejoiced that they had been dismissed, and she no longer feared showing herself in public.

However, as she had been unable to recover her strength, she stayed in her room, where, a few days before the Feast of the Purification, some friends visited her. It was icy cold at the time; and the river Schie, which runs through the town, as well as the canals were frozen over; and in this wintry weather all Holland goes skating. These young girls invited Lydwine to skate with them, but, preferring to be alone, she made the bad state of her health a pretext for not joining them. They insisted so much, however, reproaching her for not getting more exercise and assuring her that the fresh air would do her good, that, for fear of annoying them, she finally, with her father's consent, accompanied them on the frozen water of the canal which ran behind her house. She was just starting, after having put on her skates, when one of her comrades, going at full speed, ran into her before she was able to get out of the way, and she fell head over heels onto a piece of ice whose sharp edge broke one of the lower ribs on her right side.

Weeping, they took her home, and the poor girl was stretched out on a bed, which she hardly ever left again.

This accident was soon known throughout the town, and everyone thought it his duty to give advice. Lydwine had to endure like Job the interminable chatter of those whom the misfortunes of others render loquacious. Some, however, were wiser, and instead of reprimanding her for having gone out, thought that God had, no doubt, some special reason for treating her thus.



Her afflicted family was resolved to try any means possible to heal her. In spite of their poverty, they called in the most renowned physicians in the Netherlands. They tried every possible medication, but the trouble only grew worse, and as a result of their treatments a hard tumor formed in the fracture.

She suffered agonies, and her parents were at a loss to know what saint to invoke next, when a famous practitioner from Delft, a very charitable and pious man, Godfried de Haga, nicknamed Sonder-Danck because he invariably said these words — which mean “No thanks” in Dutch — to all the patients he treated gratuitously, came to see her in consultation. His ideas on therapeutics were those that Bombast Paracelsus, who was born some years after the death of Lydwine, expounds in his *Opus paramirum*. Amid the rather incoherent jumble of his occultism, this astonishing man had grasped the idea of divine equilibrium when he wrote on the subject of the essence of God: “you must know that all sickness is an expiation and that, if God does not consider it finished, no doctor can interrupt its course . . . The doctor only heals if his intervention coincides with the end of the expiation determined by the Savior.”

Godfried de Haga then examined the patient and spoke thus to his assembled colleagues, who were anxious to hear his verdict: “This sickness, dear friends, is not under our jurisdiction; all the Galens, Hippocrateses, and Avicennas of the world would here lose their reputation.” And he added, prophetically: “The hand of God is on this child. He will work great marvels in her. Would to God she were my daughter; I would willingly give my weight in gold to pay for that favor, if it were to be sold.”

And he departed prescribing no remedy. Then all the charlatans lost interest in her, and at least for a time she was no longer obliged to swallow useless and expensive remedies; but her illness got worse, and the pain became intolerable. She could neither lie down, nor sit, nor stand. Not knowing what to try next and unable to remain in any position for more than a moment, she asked to be lifted from one bed to another, thinking this might deaden her acute pain; but the jostling from these movements only exacerbated the torture.

On the Vigil of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist her torments reached their culmination. She sobbed on her bed in a terrible state of abandonment, and at last she could bear it no longer; her pain increased to such an agonizing degree that she threw herself from her bed and fell, broken, upon her father's knees, who was seated weeping at her side. This fall punctured the abscess, but instead of bursting on the out-



side, it broke within, and the pus gushed from her mouth. This vomiting shook her from head to toe and was abundant to the extent that it filled up basins so quickly that they hardly had time to empty them before even the largest was overflowing again. Finally, she fainted in a last retch, and her parents believed her dead.

However, she regained consciousness, and then the most sinister life imaginable began for her. Unable to support herself upright and always agitated by the need to change position, she dragged herself on her knees, and crawled on her stomach, holding on to the chairs and the corners of the furniture. Burning with fever, she was obsessed with unhealthy tastes and drank dirty or tepid water when she could get it, then threw it up, wracked with terrible spasms. Three years passed thus, and to perfect her martyrdom, she was abandoned by those who until then had come to see her from time to time. The sight of her agony, her groans and cries, the horrible mask of her face, swollen from tears, drove her visitors away. Her family alone helped her; her father's kindness never failed, but her mother was less resigned to her lot as nurse and, weary of hearing her constant groaning, was often harsh with her.

The grief she experienced, feeling so wretched already and being obliged to submit to tirades and reproaches as well, would no doubt have killed her, had not God, who until then seemed to have been in a state of doubt about her, suddenly intervened on her behalf, showing her, by a sudden miracle, that He would not desert her, and at the same time teaching a lesson of mercy to her mother.

The circumstances were as follows:

One day two men were quarreling in the square, and one of them, drawing his sword, fell upon the other, who, being either disarmed or less courageous, fled. Seeing the door of Lydwine's house open at the corner of the street, he burst in. His adversary, who had not seen him enter, suspected nevertheless that he had taken refuge there, and seeing Petronille looking at him in terror on the threshold, he cried, foaming with rage: "Where is he, this son of death? Don't try to deceive me, he must be hiding with you!" She assured him, trembling, that he was not, but he did not believe her. Pushing her aside and uttering the most terrible threats, he walked right into Lydwine's room and ordered the sick girl not to deceive him.

Lydwine, incapable of lying, replied: "He whom you are pursuing is indeed here."

At these words Petronille, who had slipped in behind the man, could not contain herself and slapped her daughter, crying: "You miserable



fool, you give up a man who is your guest when he is in danger of death!"

The furious man, however, neither saw nor heard anything of this scene. Blaspheming aloud, he searched for his enemy, who was standing in front of him in the middle of the room, but had become invisible to him. Not finding him, he rushed out to recover his traces, while his antagonist fled in the other direction as quickly as his legs would carry him.

When they had gone, Lydwine, who had received this correction without complaint, murmured: "I thought, Mother, that telling the truth would suffice to save this man"; and Petronille, admiring her daughter's faith and the miracle that had rewarded it, was filled with the most kindly sentiments and thereafter bore the trouble Lydwine's infirmities caused her with less resentment and bitterness.

It must be admitted that she did have some excuse for her bitterness. The good woman had continual hardship and grueling work, and if the infirmities of her child already seemed excessive, they were nothing compared with what she had coming.

Soon Lydwine could not even drag herself around on her knees and clutch the coffers and chairs but had to crouch down in her bed, this time forever. The wound under her rib, which had never healed, swelled up, and gangrene set in. The putrefaction bred worms, which crawled under the skin of her stomach and spread over three ulcers, as large and round as the bottom of a bowl. They multiplied in the most alarming manner, and, according to Brugman, swarmed so that they appeared to boil. They were as large as the end of a spindle, their bodies gray and watery and their heads black.

The doctors were summoned again, and they prescribed that plasters should be applied to these nests of vermin made of fresh flour, honey, and the fat of capons, to which some of them recommended the addition of cream or the fat of boiled eels, all sprinkled with dried beef and reduced to powder in an oven.

These remedies, which demanded care in their preparation — for it was remarked that if the wheat was the slightest bit stale the worms would not feed on it — relieved her, and by this means one or two hundred worms were drawn from her wounds every twenty-four hours.

Lydwine's biographers tell us this anecdote about the plaster made with the fat of capons:

The parish priest of Schiedam was at that time one Father André of the Order of Premontarians, detached from his convent on the Island of Saint Marie, and this priest had a truly degraded soul. Gluttonous



and rapacious, caring only for his own well-being, he wanted to entertain the clergy of the parish at the approach of Lent, and killed some capons that he had carefully fattened. Now at that time he was due at Lydwine's house to hear her confession, and knowing of his plans and the fowl that were being prepared, she asked him to give her the fat from one of them for the preparation of her ointment. He angrily replied that he could not; his capons were thin, and the little gravy that ran from them was used by the cook to baste them. She insisted, even offering the same weight of butter in exchange for the fat; but as he still refused, she looked at him and said:

"You have refused what I ask as alms in the name of Jesus; well, I now pray to Our Savior that your chickens be devoured by cats."

And so it happened. On the morning of the feast, when the larder was inspected, instead of capons ready for the spit only scattered fragments of bones were found.

If this adventure, as we shall see, did not have the effect of making this priest less selfish and sordid, it served at least to render him more sagacious and less churlish on a similar occasion, as Gerlac relates in this further episode:

Besides the plasters of flour and lard, Lydwine sometimes placed slices of freshly cut apple on her wounds to allay the inflammation. Now the priest possessed an abundance of apples in his garden, so the saint asked him for some for this purpose. He began to grumble and declare that he had none left, but when he got home he remembered the lost capons and immediately sent some apples to his penitent, saying: "I offer them to you for fear that this time it will be the dormice that eat them."

But in truth these medicines were only palliatives and did not heal. A doctor from Cologne who had heard of Lydwine, perhaps through his friend Godfried de Haga, was at first more successful, though, all things considered, he seems to have made matters worse in the end. He applied to these virulent centers compresses steeped in a mixture he prepared by distilling certain plants picked in the woods at dawn in dry weather, when they were still covered with dew. This mixture, added to an extract of centaury or millflower, gradually dried up the ulcers. This doctor was a good man, and to ensure that Lydwine would never be without his remedy, even if he died before she did, he arranged for his son-in-law, an apothecary named Nicolas Reiner, to send her after his death all the flasks of the mixture she would need to close the wounds.

But the moment arrived when all these palliatives became useless,



for the patient's entire body was an open wound. Besides these ulcers in which colonies of worms fed without being destroyed, a tumor appeared on her shoulder and festered. It was the dreaded plague of the Middle Ages, the Saint Anthony's fire, which attacked her right arm and consumed the flesh to the bone. Her nerves were all twisted and splintered, except for one that held her arm and prevented it from becoming detached from her trunk. From now on it was impossible for Lydwine to turn herself to this side, and only her left arm remained free to raise her head, which was rotting in turn. Violent neuralgic pains assailed her, boring into her temples like a brace and pounding her skull like a mallet. Her forehead split apart from the roots of her hair to the center of her nose; her chin dropped away under her lower lip, and her mouth swelled; her right eye was extinguished, and the other became so sensitive that the slightest light caused it to bleed. She also suffered from violent toothaches, which sometimes raged for weeks on end and rendered her half mad; and finally, after a severe inflammation of the throat, which suffocated her, she lost blood through her mouth, ears, and nose in such profusion that the bed was dripping with it.

Those who stood by wondered how such a quantity of blood could flow from a body so completely exhausted, and poor Lydwine tried to smile. "Say," she murmured, "you who have been in the world longer than I, whence can that sap come which in spring swells the vine, so black and bare in winter?"

It seemed that she had endured every possible ill. This was not so. Reading the descriptions of her biographers, which I have softened somewhat, is like being in a hospital watching a succession of the most terrifying diseases, the rarest cases and the most excruciating pain.

Soon, in addition to her other infirmities, her chest, until then unscathed, was also affected; she blew bloody mucus from her nose, which was filled with pustules and boils; the stones that had tortured her in her childhood and had disappeared returned, and she evacuated calculi the size of small eggs. Next her lungs and liver decayed; then a chancre dug a deep hole that spread throughout her body and devoured her flesh; and finally, when the plague ravaged Holland, she was its first victim and was afflicted with two buboes, one in the groin, the other near the heart. "Two, that is well," she exclaimed, "but if it pleases Our Lord, I think three in honor of the Holy Trinity would be better!" and a third abscess formed in her cheek.

She would have been dead twenty times over had these ailments been natural; one alone would have been enough to kill her; thus there was no hope of a cure, nothing to try, nothing to do.



The fame of all these ills so strangely united in one person, who continued living and was yet mortally attacked in every part of her body, soon spread abroad; and if it brought her charlatans, who had sometimes aggravated her ills with dubious panaceas, it also brought her another visit from that good Godfried de Haga, who had attended her after her fall.

He arrived in Schiedam, accompanied by the Countess Marguerite of Holland, one of his patients, who wished to verify for herself the case of this extraordinary invalid, of whom she had often heard the nobles of the court speak. She wept with pity on seeing Lydwine, so inhuman in appearance.

Godfried, who had already prognosticated the divine origin of these ills, could only reiterate his lack of power to heal them with his art; but, believing he might succeed in providing some relief for the patient, he removed her intestines, which he placed in a basin, and after sorting through them and cleaning them, replacing those that were not completely ruined. His diagnosis was that she was afflicted with a putrefaction of the marrow, which he rather bizarrely attributed to the fact that Lydwine did not salt her food, and he added, on leaving, that a new malady, dropsy, would soon appear. His forecast was correct, and dropsy set in as soon as the ulcers, dressed with the solutions and compresses ordered by the Cologne doctor, were healed. When they no longer suppurated, the sufferer began to swell, and regretted having exchanged one evil for another more painful one.

She endured this incredible assault of physical calamities for thirty-eight years, without an instant's respite or a single easy hour.

It should be noted that among the miseries she endured were two of the three scourges that came from the Orient and desolated Europe during the Middle Ages: burning sickness, a sort of gangrene that raged like a hidden fire in the flesh of the limbs and split the bones until death ended the torture; and the black plague, which, according to the observation of a contemporary doctor, "manifested itself by continuous fever, external tumors, and carbuncles, frequently under the armpit and in the groin, and caused death in five days."

There remains a third scourge, which was also the despair of those centuries, leprosy.

It was missing from the list of torments the poor girl underwent. God, who in the Scriptures and in the lives of the saints appears particularly interested in the *mesel*, or leprous, whom He cured and from whom He borrowed the repulsive figure to try the charity of His saints, did not see fit to put His servant to this last trial; and the motive for



this exception, which is at first surprising, is easily understood on reflection. Leprosy would have counteracted the Lord's designs and rendered the development of Lydwine's holiness impossible.

It is well to remember that, during the Middle Ages, lepers were considered incurable, for all the doctors' pharmacopoeia, the hellebore, the sulfur baths, the flesh of vipers used since ancient times, and arsenic, tried by Paracelsus, had failed to cure even one. For fear of contagion, they were shut up in special hospitals or isolated in small houses in districts that they were forbidden, under threat of severe penalty, to leave. They even had to wear distinctive clothing, a sort of gray tunic or prison dress, and to shake in their always-gloved hand a rattle called a "tartavelle," to prevent people from approaching. The leper was a pariah, legally dead, separated forever from the world, and buried after his death in an isolated place.

The liturgy was terrible to him. The Church celebrated in his presence, before his sequestration, a Mass of the Holy Spirit with the prayer "pro infirmis," and then led him in procession to the hut where he was destined to go or to the sick quarters, if one existed in the country. The frightful prohibitions, which cut him off from the living, were read to him, three pellets of earth taken from the cemetery were thrown on the roof of his hut, a cross was planted in front of his door, and that ended the *mesel*.

In certain districts of France the ritual was even more sinister. The wretch afflicted with the malady of "Monsieur Saint Ladre" entered the church on the day set for his ordeal laid out on a bier and covered with a black cloth, as if he were dead. The clergy chanted the "libera" and carried off the body. The leper did not get up until he arrived in front of the lazaret or hut that was to shelter him; and there, with bent head, he listened to the reading of his sentence, which enjoined him not to set foot outside, not to touch anyone, and went so far as to stipulate that he remain downwind of healthy persons if by chance he should come across them.

The rules of leprosy have been, for the most part, the same everywhere, and the customs of Hainault county, which in the fourteenth century was one of the provinces making up the domain of the Netherlands, included a series of ordinances of this kind. It is therefore certain that, had Lydwine been attacked by leprosy, she would have been taken away from home and practically buried alive; she would not have been tended by her father and mother or, after their death, by her nephew and niece, who would have been separated from her for fear of spreading the disease; she would, from then on, have remained unknown,



since no one would have been able to visit her, and the example that God desired her to set would have been totally useless.

It must be noted, too, that this question of the care given to her appears to have been considered in a very special manner by Our Lord. He overwhelmed her with torments; He disfigured her, substituting for the charm of her clear countenance the horror of a face swollen all out of shape, a sort of lion's muzzle, ravaged by channels of tears and streaks of blood; He transformed her into a skeleton and raised on this wasted frame the ridiculous dome of a stomach filled with water; He made her, for those who see only the outward appearance, hideous; but while He heaped upon her all these misfortunes, He did not want the nurses in charge of dressing her wounds to be disgusted by the odor of decomposition, which would necessarily rise up from such wounds, and tire of their charitable offices.

By a constant miracle He made these wounds censers of perfume; plasters removed teeming with vermin would sweetly scent the air; her pus smelled good, delicate aromas emanated from her vomit; and He wished that, from her body, in shreds, which He spared the sad demands that so shame the bedridden, there should always emanate an exquisite odor of shells and spices of the Orient, a fragrance at once keen and sweet, something like the biblical aroma of laurel, or the Dutch aroma of cinnamon.

#### CHAPTER IV

Speaking incidentally of Lydwine in his biography of Sister Catherine Emmerich, who was, in the nineteenth century, one of the direct inheritors of the Saint of Schiedam, a German monk, Father Schmöger, draws a comparison between her afflictions and those the Church then endured. For example, he likens her ulcerations to the wounds of Christianity torn by the disorders of schism, suggests that the pain of the stone that she suffered symbolized the state of concubinage in which numerous priests then lived, that the pustules on her bosom signified the children "deprived of the milk of holy doctrine," and so on. The truth is that these analogies are singularly farfetched and even a little comical, and that it would be both more exact and more simple to specify nothing and to make the general statement we have already suggested, that Lydwine expiated by her maladies the misdeeds of others.

But was her soul, in this torn envelope, this vestment riddled and eaten by worms, invariably firm? Was it sufficiently fervent and robust



to endure without murmuring the measureless weight of her ills? Was Lydwine, from the moment her infirmities prostrated her, a saint?

Not at all; the few details we have been left with affirm the contrary. She did not at all resemble those lovers of God who supposedly possessed, right from the start, virtue without going through the trouble of acquiring it. Her biographers, so vague on some points, have not misled us as so many of their colleagues have done, whose histories present us with women who are not women, heroines impeccable but false, beings who have nothing living, nothing human, about them.

She broke down under the pain and wished to flee; when she found herself captive on her bed, she cried until she had no tears left and very nearly fell into despair. How could it have been otherwise? She was not prepared to climb the hill of Calvary in such terrifying stages. Until the day she broke her rib, life had been for her full of work, but easy; her childhood did not differ from that of many little girls of the people whom poverty ripened young, for it was necessary when they finished school for them to help their mothers with the other children. She was, however, happier than her schoolmates and her neighbors, for she was beloved, as none of them were, by the blessed Virgin, who condescended to animate her statue and to smile to give her pleasure; but Lydwine, who knew nothing of the mystic way, could not guess that these attentions were only the prelude to frightful torments. She imagined in her simplicity that these indulgences would continue and that it would be for her as it was for all those whose souls Jesus seized for the forge of Love and poured, when melted, into the nuptial mold of His Cross; but she would learn that the marriage of the soul consummates itself more often when the body is reduced to a state of dust, to the condition of a rag. These initial joys ceased abruptly, for as soon as she had weaned the soul, the Madonna put it out of her arms on the earth, and it had to seek its own nourishment and walk alone without a safety net. In fact, it followed the usual route before beginning to tread an extraordinary path.

During the first four years of sickness, she believed herself truly damned, and all consolation was refused her. Having overwhelmed her with blows, God turned away from her and even appeared to no longer know who she was. Her situation was then certainly as sad as that of all others whom sickness confines to their bed.

The foretaste of suffering stimulates prayer with the hope, if not of an immediate cure, at least of some relief from the acute pain. But when none of your petitions are granted, discouragement sets in and your prayers become more feeble as your misery increases. Contempla-



tion becomes impossible; the pitiable lot you are subjected to becomes entirely engrossing; it is impossible to think of anyone but yourself, and your time is spent in deploring your misfortune. Those prayers that you continue by force of habit, by a secret impulse from heaven — prayers you consider all the more worthy of being heard since they cost so much — degenerate in a moment of overwhelming distress into mere expressions of resentment, into demands upon God to fulfill the promises of His Gospels, into bitter repetitions of the “ask and it shall be given you,” and conclude in lassitude and disgust. Doubt insinuates itself little by little, and when, in a moment of fervor, in a moment of lessened pain, the wish to pray returns, it seems that you no longer know how. Invocations that come not from the heart fall to the ground, and it is unthinkable that Christ should stoop to pick them up. The temptation to despair begins; and while He stirs the brazier of tortures, the spirit of Malice becomes pathetic and plaintive, emphasizing your unanswered wishes and ineffective prayers, and the invalid falls back, exhausted.

The horizon becomes black and all distance is blotted out. God, whose memory still dominates, appears only as an inexorable miracle worker who could, but does not want, to heal you with a sign. He is no longer indifferent, He is an enemy; you would show more mercy than He were you in His place! Would you allow people to suffer thus when you could so easily relieve them? God seems to be a bad Samaritan, an unmerciful judge. It is useless to say to yourself, in a moment of common sense, that you have sinned, that you must atone for your offenses; you conclude that the sum of your transgressions is not great enough to warrant the imposition of so much pain, and you accuse your Lord of injustice, daring to point out to Him that the severity of the punishment does not match the sin. Feeling helpless, you make no attempt to console yourself other than self-pity and complaint at being the victim of injustice. The more you groan the more self-centered you become, until your soul, turned awry by these querulous adulations of its own being, exhausts itself and ends up lying in an alley, turning its back to God, not wishing to speak to Him, wanting, like a wounded animal, only to suffer in peace, hiding in a corner.

But this desolation has its highs and its lows. The impossibility of surmounting fate turns the poor soul, which cannot always keep up the same position, back toward its Maker. Then you reproach yourself for your defection and your reprimands, you implore His forgiveness, and a gentleness is born of this reconciliation. Little by little thoughts of resigning yourself to the will of God plant themselves within you



and take root, if the Devil, always on the watch, does not intervene to unearth them, or if, for instance, a visit made in charity and in the hope of affording you some comfort does not completely miss its mark, throwing you back into sentiments of regret and envy. One of the sad truths of the bedridden: while solitude is oppressive, visitors are overwhelming. If no one comes, you feel abandoned, neglected by those on whose friendship you relied, yet if they do come the vision of their good health contrasted with your own brings on a relapse of self-pity. You must have already advanced very far on the road to perfection not to suffer from this comparison, and Lydwine, haunted by her distress, must have known well these despairs of the lacerated soul, these howls of pain.

What we do know for certain, in any case, is that when she heard the laughter of her schoolmates at play in the street she burst into tears and asked God why she, apart from all others, should be so harshly treated.

We have to believe, however, that she was already fit to bear the most terrible calamities, for God took no heed of her tears and, instead of alleviating them, increased them.

To these bodily tortures, to these torments of the soul, was shortly added the horror of mystic darkness. While she tried to stand up against discouragement, she was broken on the wheel of the expiatory life and was there immersed; for then, besides her obsession with her own impotence with the thanklessness of her being, there began a spiritual ataxia that made her soul waver off course, until all her faculties suffered paralysis. As Saint John of the Cross observes, God plunges reason into darkness, will into indifference, memory into the void, and the heart into bitterness. Lydwine was subject to these periods of spiritual abandonment, grafted and mixed up with the obstinate regretfulness of pain, for years. She thought herself cursed by the Heavenly Spouse, and the apprehension that this state would continue indefinitely augmented her anguish.

No human creature could have resisted such assaults had she not been under divine surveillance and ardently sustained. God, however, concealed His aid from Lydwine during this period of purification. He withdrew all tangible consolation. He did not even lend her the aid of a priest, for it is perfectly clear that the priest of Schiedam, the man with the capons, was incapable of helping her in her destitution. Neither does it appear that the communion, that balm of the afflicted, that sovereign medicine for the soul, was administered to her very often, for Gerlac and Brugman note that at the time when she could still drag



herself about, her parents led her to church on Easter Day, where she knelt as best she could at the altar rail.

They tell us further that when she was confined to her bed her throat inflammation often prevented her from consuming the sacred elements; indeed à Kempis, who is more precise on the matter, declares distinctly that she only took communion when she was well, at the Feast of the Resurrection. Then, he adds, when she could no longer leave her room, she received the body of the Lord once more; and finally, a long time after she was completely bedridden, they brought her the eucharist six times a year. During this period, it is true, the sacrament was distributed somewhat infrequently, but may we not trace in part this privation of the sole cordial powerful enough to reanimate her to the spiritual anemia that overwhelmed her?

To sum up, never did a woman appear so abandoned by Him whose implored caresses seemed changed into bitter deceits and hard rebuffs. Her case would seem to be unique. Other saints certainly knew the same agony; they passed, like her, through the trails of the purgative life, but they did not, for the most part, undergo at the same time the hell of physical torture. The soul might be bleeding, but the body would be in health to sustain its companion to the best of its power; to tend it like a sick child whom one cradles in one's arms; to lead it into churches; to soothe its agony by distraction. Or else, on the contrary, the body failed but the soul remained active and raised her acolyte by the force of spiritual energy. With Lydwine, alas, the soul and its shell were equally afflicted; both were worn and unable to help each other; both were on the point of collapsing, when suddenly the Lord, whom she thought so far off, magnificently affirmed, through the miracle of the man who was made invisible, that He was watching over her, that He was finally looking after her.

Judging that the darkness had lasted long enough for the poor girl, He put an end to it with the light of grace. He entrusted a human intermediary, a priest named Jan Pot, with the task of explaining her vocation to her and of consoling her.

Who was this Jan Pot, her confessor along with Dom André, the priest of Schiedam? Gerlac and à Kempis speak of him as being that ecclesiastic who came to give her communion when she had obtained permission to partake of the Lord's Supper twice a year. He does not appear to have held the priest in very high esteem, for it was he who announced to Lydwine — with joy, says Gerlac — that the cats had eaten the capons. Where did he come from? What was his position in the town? How did he know the saint? To all these questions we have no answer.



However, if we compare two passages, one in Gerlac and the other in Brugman, both relating to a Schiedam magistrate's temptation to commit suicide, which we shall speak of later on, we may perhaps gather that Jan Pot was the parish curate. In any case, we can feel certain that he was truly sent by God to explain Lydwine's mission to her and to direct her.

One day after having uttered the usual commonplaces suitable to the sick, he concluded simply:

"My daughter, until now you have neglected to meditate sufficiently on the Passion of Christ. From now on do so and you will see that God's yoke of loving suffering will become easy to bear. Accompany Him to the Garden of Olives, to Pilate, to Golgotha, and say to yourself that when death prevents His further suffering, all is not finished, that you must further, like a faithful widow, accomplish the last wishes of your Spouse, and supply by your sufferings what are still necessary to His."

Lydwine listened without really understanding what these words meant. She thanked him for having been so kind to her, and when he was gone she tried to take his advice and reflected. But it was in vain that she tried to imagine the scenes of Calvary; her thoughts wandered, and her own torments were more interesting to her than those of Jesus. She tried to tear herself away from herself by adopting a method which Jan Pot had briefly discussed to facilitate the practice of this exercise; she forced herself to rally her thoughts, and after having ordered them, to send them off on the path of the Savior; but they quickly turned around and came galloping back to herself. Then she completely lost her train of thought. When she had recovered a little she summoned all her strength to apply blinders to the eyes of her spirit to prevent herself from looking to one side or the other, and to force herself to follow only one track; but this process was completely unsuccessful; her soul obstinately refused to advance. In short, meditating on command exhausted her, and this she very frankly confessed to the priest when he visited her again.

"Father," she said, "I wish to obey you, but I do not understand anything at all about meditation. When I struggle to consider the tortures of Christ I can think of nothing but my own. The yoke of Christ has not, as you assured me it would, become lighter. Ah! If you knew its weight!"

Jan Pot did not appear the least surprised at this response. He praised Lydwine for her attempt and patiently explained to her that her parched condition, her lack of energy, the wandering of her thoughts, her inability to concentrate on a single point, were nevertheless graces. He



made her understand that prayer recited by compulsion is perhaps the most agreeable that God can receive, since it is the only one that costs the utterer dear. He said to her, with Saint Gertrude, that if the Lord always accorded inward consolations they would be harmful, for they would weaken the soul and diminish the weight of its experience; and it is probable that, after this preamble, he suddenly tore away the veil that hid the future, and revealed to her her vocation as a victim on earth, illustrating the meaning of Saint Paul's phrase, "to complete the sufferings of Christ."

He certainly explained to her that humanity is governed by laws that the heedless ignore, the law of solidarity in evil and redemption in goodness; of solidarity in Adam, and redemption in Our Savior. In other words, each individual is, up to a certain point, responsible for the misdeeds of others, and must also, up to a certain point, atone for them; and each can also, if it so please God, attribute to some extent the merits that he possesses or acquires to those who have none or who will not acquire them.

These laws have been put forth by the Almighty, and He first observed them in applying them to the Person of His Son. The Father consented that the Word should bear the sins of the world and pay the ransom for others. He willed that His gratification, which could not benefit Himself since He was innocent and perfect, should be profitable to the miscreants, the guilty, all the sinners whom He had come to redeem. He willed that the Savior should be the first to present the example of mystic substitution, the replacement of Him who owes nothing for him who owes all; and Jesus wanted certain souls to inherit the succession to His sacrifice.

Indeed the Savior can no longer suffer Himself, having ascended to His Father and the jubilant azure of Heaven; His task of redemption was accomplished with His blood, His tortures ended with His death. If He wishes to suffer here below, it can only be in His Church, in the members of His mystic body.

Those souls of atonement who reenact the torments of Calvary, who nail themselves to the empty place of Jesus on the Cross, are in some ways the doubles of the Son. They reflect His poor face in a mirror of blood. They do more, for they alone give this all powerful God something He would otherwise lack; the possibility of suffering again for us. They satisfy this desire that has survived His death, for it is as infinite as the love which engenders it; they dispense to this marvelous Pauper the alms of tears; they restore to Him in His joy that sacrifice which is denied Him.



"And, Lydwine, if these souls, who accept, like their Creator, chastisement for crimes they are not guilty of, did not exist, the universe would be like our own country without the protection of dykes. It would be engulfed by the tide of sins like Holland by the flow of waves.

"They are then, at one and the same time, the benefactors of Heaven and Earth.

"But, my daughter, when a soul reaches this point, its manner of suffering changes. God in some way intermingles the extreme sensations of beatitude and pain, so that they merge. Where is the one, and what remains of the other? No one knows; it is the incomprehensible fusion of an excess and a weakness, and the soul would burst under the pressure if the martyrdom of the body did not intervene to let it recover its breath to better rejoice. In short, it is by the steps of suffering that one ascends to joy.

"At the actual moment your spiritual being is bared, but understand, you suffer because you do not wish to suffer; the secret of your distress lies there. Gather up and offer to God that suffering which causes you to despair, and He will lighten it! He will reward you with such compensations that the moment will come when you will cry: 'But I have cheated Him! He has contracted with me on false terms! I offered myself to expiate by the most terrible chastisements the transgressions of the world, and He fills me with a measureless joy, a happiness that knows no bounds. He exiles me, He dispossesses me, He rids me of myself, for it is He who laughs and weeps, it is He who lives in me!'

"When this happens, I will say what I say now. Do not be uneasy, my daughter. Our Lord knows very well that He has lent Himself to this fraud, but He only loves those who feel thus.

"Your mission is clear; it consists of sacrificing yourself for others, of atoning for faults you have not committed, of practicing a sublime and truly divine charity.

"Say to Jesus: 'I wish to place myself upon Your Cross, and I wish that You would drive in the nails.' He will accept this role of executioner, and the angels will aid Him. Oh yes! He, your Savior, will take you at your word! They will bring Him the thorns, the gimlet, the cords, the sponge, the vinegar, the lance; but when He sees you stretched on the gibbet, suspended between heaven and earth, as He was upon the Cross, not yet able to attain the firmament but no longer touching the ground, His heart will melt with pity and He will not wait till His justice is satisfied before taking you down. Like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, He will support your head while the blessed Virgin lays you on her knees; but there will be no more tears; Mary will



smile, Magdalen will weep no longer and will embrace you gaily like an elder sister!"

Lydwine's eyes were opened; she began to understand the cause of her incredible illnesses and she submitted, willingly accepting this mission that the Redeemer had called her to fulfill; but how should she proceed?

"By following the advice I have given you," the priest answered, "by meditating nonstop on the Passion of Christ. You must not be discouraged, and just because you did not at first succeed in removing yourself from yourself, you must not renounce an exercise that will lead you without fail, when you are accustomed to it, to lose your own path and follow that of the divine Spouse.

"Do not imagine, either, that your trial is longer and more bitter than that of the Cross, which was relatively short, and that after all many martyrs suffered torments more barbarous and more lasting than those of Our Savior when they suffered the wheel, the rack, or flaying with iron combs, when they were forced into red-hot helmets, boiled in oil, sawn in two, or slowly ground between the millstones. For nothing is more untrue: no torture can compare with that of Jesus.

"Think of the prelude to the Passion in the garden of Gethsemane, of that inexpressible moment when He could not help but be fully damned in body and soul, and the word ceased, holding, in a certain manner, his divinity in suspense, stripping them of this ability to be insensible, so that He might better debase Himself to the level of His creatures and to their mode of suffering. In a word, during the drama of Calvary, humanity predominated in the Human-God, and this was excruciating. When He suddenly felt Himself become so weak, and he contemplated the terrible burden of iniquities which He was called upon to bear, He trembled and fell prostrate.

"The darkness of the night opened up and framed, with its enormous shadows, the mysteriously illuminated scenes. On a background of menacing light the centuries paraded past one by one, bringing with them idolatry and incest, sacrilege and murder, all the old misdeeds perpetrated since the fall of the first man — and as they passed they were hailed and acclaimed by the cheers of evil angels! Overcome, Jesus lowered His eyes. When He raised them these phantoms of past generations had vanished, but the wickedness of that Judea which He had evangelized teemed before Him and filled Him with anger. He saw Judas, He saw Caiaphas, He saw Pilate, He saw Saint Peter, He saw the debased creatures who were going to spit in His face and crown Him with drops of blood. The Cross rose, frantic, on the disordered heavens,



and groans were heard from Limbo. He rose, but seized with vertigo, He faltered and sought an arm to support Him. He was alone.

"Then He dragged Himself to His disciples, who were sleeping in the distance in the calmness of the night, and woke them. They looked at Him alarmed and fearful, asking themselves if this man with frantic gestures and distressed eyes was indeed that Jesus who had been transfigured before them on Mount Tabor with His resplendent face and His snowy robe on fire. The Savior smiled in pity; He only reproached them for not staying awake, and after having returned to them twice, He left them while He agonized in his lonely corner.

"He knelt to pray, but now it was no longer a question of the past or present; it was a question of the future that was advancing and was even more to be dreaded. The coming centuries followed one another, showing changed territories, developed towns, even seas that had become transfigured, and continents that were no longer recognizable. Only humans, while in a different dress, remained the same; they stole and murdered, they persisted in crucifying their Savior to satisfy their lust and their passion for gain. In decors that varied with the age, the same golden calf was erected and reigned. Drunk with grief, Jesus sweated blood and cried: 'Father, if Thou wilt, take away this chalice.' Then he added, resigned: 'Thy will be done, not mine!'

"Well, my daughter, you see that these preliminary tortures surpass all that your imagination is capable of conceiving; they were so intense that the human nature of Christ would have been broken and He would not have reached Golgotha alive had angels not come to console Him; and yet the worst of His sufferings was yet to come, on the Cross. Without doubt His physical torture was horrible, but how painless it was in comparison to the rest! For on the Cross he was assaulted by all the ignominies of all time, the opprobrium of past, present, and future, melted and concentrated into a sort of corrosive and vile essence that flooded over him. It was something like a charnel house of hearts, a pestilence of souls who threw themselves on the wood of the Cross to infect it. This chalice He had accepted to drink poisoned the very air! The angels who had comforted the Savior in the garden of Gethsemane no longer intervened; they wept, cast to the ground before this abominable death of God; the sun fled, the earth groaned in fear, the terrified rocks were on the point of splitting open. Then Jesus uttered a heartrending cry: 'Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?'

"And he died.

"Think of all that, Lydwine, and assure yourself that your suffering is mild compared to that. Call to mind the unforgettable scenes in the



garden of Gethsemane and in Golgotha; look at the Heavenly Spouse's head insulted by blows and crowned with thorns; put yourself in His footprints, and as long as you follow them the stages will become easier, the forced steps will be lighter."

And the good man left her, having promised to come again. Lydwine was generous, she gave herself wholeheartedly as a beast of burden to carry the load of sins; but this oblation did not ease her pain, nor did it release her. When she wanted to stop, while meditating at each station of the Cross, she stumbled like someone who has been blindfolded and cannot, when first uncovered, walk straight. Once again she left the road to Calvary to wander along little paths that inevitably led her back to her point of departure, her own sufferings. God regarded her in silence and made no movement. Naturally she was distraught; she believed that Jan Pot had inflicted an impossible task upon her, and she melted again into tears. She was ready to sink into despair when Easter arrived in the liturgical cycle of the year and the good Jan Pot brought the Savior with him in the form of the sacrament, and said:

"My child, until today I have spoken to you about the martyrdom of Jesus. From now on I will be silent, for He Himself will knock at the door of your heart and speak to you."

And he gave her communion.

Her soul immediately burst open and love gushed forth in an explosion, sending out a spurt of flames that formed a halo around his extraordinary Face, which she contemplated from the most profound depths of her being, from the very source of her person. Mad with grief and mad with joy she no longer even felt her wretched body; the groans her tortures had wrung from her disappeared in her cries of hosanna. Drunk with a divine inebriety, her mind wandered, no longer remembering itself except to gather a bouquet of her sufferings to offer as a welcome to the divine Host. Then her tears flowed for two entire weeks in a rain of love that saturated the arid and almost dead soil. The celestial gardener spread His seed and the flowers of the Passion grew at once. Those meditations on the death of the Redeemer, which had so exhausted her, now never tired her; the sight of the divine Spouse in agony took her away from herself into His very presence. What she now yearned for was not the jubilant health of her comrades, but the silent tenderness of Veronica, who had been so fortunate as to wipe the blood from the face of Christ. Ah! To be Magdalen; to be the Cyrenean, the man to whom was reserved that unique privilege, that unique glory kept from even the greatest apostle, of helping Jesus carry all the sins of the world with His Cross, a simple fisherman coming to the aid of God!



She would have liked to have been among them, behind them, making herself useful in some way, to have helped pass to the holy women, the water, the herbs, the basin, the sponge to wash His wounds; she would have liked to have been their servant, rendering them humble services without even being seen. It seemed to her now that she was placing her feet in the footsteps of the Son; that in suffering she carried away a part of His pain and thereby diminished it; and she coveted the thought of taking it all away from Him, reproaching Him for keeping it for himself. She complained of the inadequacy of her tortures, of the parsimony with which He afflicted her.

And without ceasing she moved forward, an assiduous pilgrim on the road to Calvary. In imitation of the Psalmist who prayed seven times a day, she created canonical hours for her own use, dividing the day into seven parts and the drama of the Passion into the same number. She was so exact in meditating on the subject corresponding with the hour, never a minute early or a second behind, it was as though she had an inner clock.

And yet her bodily torments were increasing. Her toothaches had become so ferocious that her head trembled, and fever racked her with violent heat alternating with icy cold. When these attacks reached their worst extremes she spat up a red-colored water and fell into such weakness that it was impossible for her to utter a single word or hear anyone speak; but instead of abandoning herself to despair, as was formerly her habit, she thanked God for thus quenching her thirst for torture.

She was sometimes asked if she still wanted, as before, to be healed, and she replied: "No, I only wish one thing, and that is not to be deprived of my discomfort and pain."

And bravely she took a further step and greeted Christ.

Mardi Gras was approaching, and thinking of the increase of sins it would cause in Schiedam because of the merrymaking of the Carnival, she cried: "Lord, avenge Thyself on me for the additional offenses that these feasts will inflict on Thee!" And her prayer was immediately answered; she experienced such an acute pain in her leg that she was silent and asked for nothing more. She endured this martyrdom heroically, which continued until the day of the Resurrection, and repeated to those whose pity took the form of complaints that she would very willingly submit to such sufferings for forty years and more, if she knew she would obtain in exchange the conversion of one sinner or the deliverance of one soul from Purgatory.



## CHAPTER V

After she had entered the way of mystic substitution and had, of her own free will, offered herself as the scapegoat for the sins of the world, Jesus threw His dominion upon her and she lived that extraordinary existence wherein pain is as springboard for joy. The more she suffered the more she was satisfied and the more she wanted to suffer. She knew that she was no longer alone, that her tortures had a purpose, that they existed for the good of the Church, and that they palliated the offenses of the living and the dead. She knew that it was for the glory of God that the fragrant flower bed of her wounds grew both humble and magnificent flowers. She could verify, through her own self, the justice of Saint Félicité's response to the mockery of her executioner who ridiculed her cries when she gave birth in prison before being thrown to the wild beasts in the arena.

"What will you do when you are being devoured by the beasts?" asked this man.

And the saint replied:

"It is I who suffer now, but then, when I have been martyred, it will be another who will suffer for me, because I shall suffer for Him."

It is very difficult to analyze this life, so different from ours, with our modest tortures and minute joys. Our exultations are like our pains: mediocre; we live in a temperate climate, in a zone of tepid piety, where vegetation is stunted and nature feeble. Lydwine herself had been uprooted from sterile soil to be transplanted into the ardent soil of mysticism; and her sap, till then torpid, boiled over in the fierce fire of love.

She panted, writhed, ground her teeth, or lay half dead, and all the while she was in a state of ecstasy. She no longer lived except for in one extreme or the other; the exuberance of her jubilation compensating for her intense suffering. She expressed it very simply. "The consolations that I experience are proportionate to the trials I endure, and I find them so exquisite that I would not exchange them for all the pleasures of man."

Nevertheless, the horde of her maladies continued to overwhelm her and attacked her with a fresh upsurge of fury. Her stomach finally burst like a ripe fruit, and they had to apply a woollen cushion to push back her entrails and keep them from coming out. Soon, when they wished to move her to change the sheets of her bed, they had to bind her limbs firmly together with napkins and cloths, for otherwise her body would have fallen to pieces and come away in the hands of those who tended her.



By a miracle evidently intended to certify the superhuman origin of these ills, Lydwine no longer ate food, or scarcely ate any. In thirty years she ate only as much as a healthy person usually consumes in three days.

During the first years of her life as a recluse, her only food from morning to night was one slice of apple as thick as of the Sacred Host, which they toasted for her in the hearth with a little pair of tongs; and if she occasionally attempted to swallow a mouthful of bread steeped in beer or milk, she was only able to do so with great difficulty. After a time the thin slice of apple became too much for her and she had to content herself with a drop of wine and sugar water flavored with a dash of cinnamon or nutmeg and a morsel of date. Next she sustained herself solely on watered-down wine, wetting her lips with it rather than drinking it, absorbing about half a pint a week.

Very often, as spring water was expensive in Schiedam, they gave her river water from the Meuse, which was either salty or fresh according to the ebb and flow of the tide, for the river runs into the sea quite near the town. She preferred to have it drawn for her as the tide came in, when it was bitter and briny, because then it turned into the most delicious drink for her.

When she was reduced to sustaining herself with only this liquid, sleep, which was already rare, disappeared completely, and her nights were endless, implacable, as she remained motionless on her back, the skin of which was raw. Those attending her reckoned that she had not slept as much as three good nights in thirty years!

In the end she could not swallow anything at all, and even the wish to sleep, which was only, according to her biographers, a temptation of the devil, disappeared as well. A sort of lethargy overcame her each time she prepared to meditate on the Passion of Christ, and she struggled in vain against this drowsiness.

"Give up these exercises and sleep," said Jan Pot to her, "you will come back to them later."

She obeyed, and her state of irresistible torpor ceased.

This scarcity of food and perpetual insomnia caused her to be subjected to the most cruel humiliations and base insinuations. All the town talked of the remarkable case of a young girl who neither ate nor slept yet remained alive, and the fame of this marvel was widespread. To many her story seemed impossible; they ignored the numerous facts of this kind recorded in the biographies of saints who were predecessors or contemporaries of Lydwine. Attracted by curiosity, many came to visit and searched her house relentlessly, submitting her



to an ongoing inquisition. Her detractors did not number four only, as in the case of Job's friends; they were legion! Most of them saw only a head split from forehead to nose; a face falling apart like a pomegranate; a body whose migrating flesh had to be compressed like that of a mummy by the interlacing of bandages; and disgust overcame them at the sight of so many infirmities! Their curiosity was disappointed. Where they had expected to find a rather comely face which would have moved them, or a somewhat bizarre physiognomy which they could have mocked, they had only discovered a gorgon's mask. They only saw the surface; they perceived no source of light behind the horn panes of this broken lantern, set in a corner in the dark. And yet her soul shone through, set aglow with love, for Jesus filled it with His exclamations and gilded it with His radiance!

They avenged themselves for their disappointment by accusing her of trickery. They said that she did not really observe the diet; that she wolfed down food when she was alone and that she drank at night. They pestered her with questions, prepared pitfalls for her, tried to get her to contradict herself. To all their interrogations she answered simply:

"I do not understand you. You believe it is impossible to subsist without the help of food; but God is master, I presume, and can act as He wishes. You affirm that my maladies should kill me; but they will not kill me till the Savior wishes it." And she added, for those who showed hypocritical pity: "I am not to be pitied. I am happy as I am; and if the recitation of a Hail Mary would avail to cure me, I would not recite it."

Others went further still and brutally insulted her, crying: "Make no mistake, my beauty, we are not duped by you! You pretend to live without nourishment but you feed yourself secretly. You are a sly fox, as deceitful as can be."

And Lydwine, a little surprised at this rage, asked them what interest she could possibly have in lying like that. "Besides," she said, "to eat is not a sin and not to eat is not an act of glory, so far as I know."

Embarrassed by the good sense of these replies they changed their mode of attack and charged her with being possessed. The devil alone was capable of working such magic; and this playacting was the result of a pact with him. Rare, indeed, were those who believed her to be neither fraud nor witch, but understood what she was in reality, a victim ground in God's mortar, a pitiful effigy of the suffering Church.

Little by little, however, the truth prevailed. Annoyed at these conflicting accounts, the magistrates of Schiedam resolved to get at the facts of the case. For months they subjected Lydwine to incessant sur-



veillance and were compelled to recognize that she was a saint whose completely abnormal existence could only be explained by a particular design from on high; a fact that they promulgated in a legal document stamped with the seal of the city. They met on the September 12, 1421, to verify the testimonials concerning Lydwine's life; the privation of all nourishment and of sleep; the state of the body transformed into a repugnant heap of scraps; one portion of her entrails amputated, the other teeming with parasites and yet giving off a good smell; in short, all the details that we have enumerated. The legal document is included in its entirety in the volume of the Bollandists at the beginning of the second life by Brugman.

One ought also to add this fact stated by all her biographers, that Lydwine's parents preserved in a vase fragments of bone and strips of flesh that had detached themselves from their daughter's limbs, and that these remains gave off a sweet perfume.

Some gossips, who had heard of this wonder, ran to assure themselves of its veracity; but Lydwine, who was disturbed by these visits, implored her mother to bury these poor remains, and so as not to sadden her Petronille did so.

It seems that after this proclamation of the burgomaster and municipality of Schiedam, Lydwine was left in peace, as her good faith was of public notoriety. Four years later, however, Philippe of Burgundy, having invaded Flanders, deployed a corps to occupy Schiedam; the fortress commander, who was a Frenchman, wished to assure himself that the phenomena attested to in the town manifesto were correct. He gave as a pretext his desire to protect the saint from possible outrage, and posted a troop of six soldiers at her house, whom he chose from among the most honest and most religious. He then removed her family, who had to camp in another part of the town, and ordered his subordinates to take turns, so that they would not lose sight of their prisoner by day or night, and to prevent any food or drink from reaching her. They executed these orders to the letter, inspecting even the pots of ointment to be sure that they did not contain any substance that could comfort her. No one, except a widow named Catherine, was admitted to tend her, and she was searched before she entered the room. Thus they mounted guard around her bed for nine days, and during that time they saw Lydwine a prey to extravagant tortures, dissolved in tears, but smiling, lost in ecstasy, drowning in bliss, tossed, as if outside of this world, by waves of joy.

As for her, it is doubtful that she perceived their presence; God carried her away, far from her house, sparing her the irksome spectacle of



these men whose eyes never left her. When their duty ceased they openly certified that their captive had lived, as they had been told, on air alone without taking any food.

This surveillance, therefore, only went to prove once more Lydwine's honesty and the authenticity of the strange existence she led.

Indeed, this profusion of investigations was quite unnecessary. The mistrust of a small town on the lookout combined with the current rage for espionage in the province, made the whole affair very public. Lydwine would not have been able to swallow a mouthful of bread without all Schiedam knowing it; but if God willed that these facts should be closely examined and proven, it was so that no doubt would remain and so that such graces would not be relegated to the place of mere legend.

Indeed, it must be admitted that He constantly acts in this way. Did He not act in the same manner in the nineteenth century, toward Catherine Emmerich and Louise Lateau, two stigmatized saints whose lives present more than one analogy to that of Lydwine?

#### CHAPTER XIV

Of all Lydwine's numerous family members only a twelve-year-old nephew remained to live with her and watch over her. Of her eight brothers, two were dead, Wilhelm, the father of Petronille and Baudouin, and the other Baudouin, whose name has been revealed to us by a vision of the saint's. Were the six others dead, or did they live far away? We do not know; but, in any case, none of them is ever described as doing anything for his sister.

Baudouin, her nephew, was a pious and good little boy. We can easily picture him as a fair and rather robust child, like so many Dutch children, with a round face, rendered pleasant by nice eyes. He led a sad life, for, instead of playing in the square with children his own age, he had to stay quietly in a room, attentive to the wants of a sick woman. His aunt wished to show her gratitude for his devotion and care, and she did this in a singular manner. She feared that when she was no longer there he might perhaps be tempted to doubt his faith, and she hoped that he would never forget the astonishing marvels he had witnessed in her house, haunted by Our Savior, by His Mother, and by the angels. And, as a great endurer of pain herself, she believed that suffering alone would be strong enough to strike the child's imagination and to confirm in him forever the remembrance of so much mercy.

She therefore prayed for the Lord to give him an attack of fever,



which would not endanger his life, but would remind him, years later, of the time when he lived with her.

Her request was granted.

One evening, toward the Feast of the Nativity of the blessed Virgin, Lydwine asked her nephew, who was holding a small jug of beer in his hand, to put it on a table at the head of her bed. Baudouin obeyed, and the jug was there all night. The next day the beer had changed into an aromatic elixir, scented with heady sticks of ideal cinnamon and zest extracted from imaginary citrons. Several people tasted it and the liqueur stimulated them like a cordial, but the child, having drunk a few drops, was immediately seized with a fever that lasted until Martinmas.

After he recovered, it was Jan Walter's turn to be ill. He was the victim of an intermittent fever, whose attacks coincided with those of Lydwine, and one of his sisters, named Cécile, asked the saint how many days this sickness would last.

"Till the Sunday of Lent," she replied.

And indeed Walter did recover on that day. Later his health failed once again, but this time it was so serious that all his friends thought him lost except Lydwine, who, after having besieged heaven with her supplications, obtained his recovery.

She lessened the tortures of others with her prayers, while her own increased proportionately. She was nearing the end. In telling us the story of her nephew's fever, Gerlac implies that it took place in the year of her death; but Thomas à Kempis antedates it by one year and consequently places it in 1432.

What is certain is that her days were now numbered, and God perfected her in her mission as victim of atonement by crushing her beneath a last avalanche of woes. There was no part of her body free from disease, and yet He found places almost void of pain and filled them with it. He struck her with fits of epilepsy, and she had as many as three attacks a night. Before the first, she warned her companions so that they might restrain her and prevent her from breaking her skull against the wall.

"That is all very well," they replied, "but it would be better to avoid these seizures you say you are going to have, by asking the Lord to spare you from them. You have enough maladies without adding another, but she rebuked them for questioning God's will."

Soon, fits of dementia were added to the furies of epilepsy, but they were short lived, lasting just long enough for us to be able to say that, except leprosy, no illness had been spared her. She was also struck down by a fit of apoplexy, from which she recovered; but neuralgia and



violent toothaches never left her; a new ulcer ate away at her breast, and then, from the Feast of the Purification until Easter, her stone created terrible torments, and she suffered such contractions of the nerves that her dislocated limbs contorted and she became a freakish, misshapen thing that dripped blood and tears and emitted shrieks.

She endured the most pitiless martyrdom, but she embraced in its entirety the task she was charged to accomplish.

Jesus laid before her, in a frightful vision, the panorama of her times.

Europe appeared to her convulsed — as she herself was — on its earthly bed, and it sought with a trembling hand to cover its decomposing body with the blankets of its seas. It was no longer but a magma of flesh, a swamp of secretions, a mire of blood. An infernal rottenness was bursting its sides; a frenzy of sacrilege and crime made it groan like a beast at the slaughter; the vermin of its vices were dismembering it, the chancres of simony and the cancer of lust were devouring it alive; and Lydwine beheld in terror its cast-off tiara-crowned head being kicked back and forth between Avignon and Rome.

"See," said Christ; and on a background of conflagration she saw, under the leadership of crowned madmen, the unfettered masses. They pillaged and cut each other's throats without pity; and farther off, in regions that seemed peaceful, she saw cloisters torn apart by the intrigues of wicked monks, clergy who trafficked in the Flesh of Christ and sold the blessings of the Holy Spirit at auction; she discovered heresies, sabbaths in the forests, black masses.

She would have died of despair if God, to console her, had not also shown the counterpart of all this, an army of saints on the march. They unceasingly covered the world, reforming the abbeys, destroying the cult of Satan, subduing the masses and restraining the kings, passing, in spite of all obstacles, through a whirlwind of spitting and booing. All, whether active or contemplative, suffered and helped to pay, by their prayers and their tortures, the ransom of so much evil!

Before the immensity of that debt she felt almost poor! What were her infirmities and her afflictions in the face of that quagmire of filth? Barely a drop of water; and she implored the Lord not to spare her, but to avenge on her this multitude of offenses!

She knew that the end of her life was near, and she now feared that she had not accomplished her mission, that she had been too happy. She considered herself an unproductive worker who only brought a feeble and meager store of nectar to the hive of pain; and yet, poor sufferer, she was often wearied when, emerging from her ecstasies, she returned to her lowly room! But the apparitions comforted her.



One day, when she was in raptures, she met her grandfather at the gate of Paradise.

"My sweet child," he said to her, "I cannot let you enter this place of eternal rest, for it would be a calamity for those who need your services; you have more sins of others to amend and souls in Purgatory to free; but console yourself, my dear child, it will not be long now."

Another time her angel showed her a rose bush, which was as tall as a tree and covered with buds and flowers, and he explained to her that she would not be liberated from the pain of life till all the roses had bloomed.

"But tell us," asked Jan Walter and the widow Catherine, "are there still many buds to open?"

"All the roses are open now, except one or two," she said, "so I shall not be long in leaving you."

She also said to a prior, whom she seems to have held in high esteem:

"I should be very grateful, my dear father, if you would return to see me after Easter, but if God should take me from this world before your visit, I commend my soul to your charity."

The prior concluded from this that she would not sing alleluia upon earth during that time, and at last she admitted to those close to her that she would die during Eastertide; but she did not specify the day or the hour, because she wanted to go away alone, having no one present with her but Jesus.

"And your house; what will become of it after your death?"

"Do you remember," said she to her friends who asked her this question, "do you remember what I replied to that good Fleming when, touched by my distress, he offered to build me a more comfortable house? As long as I live I shall have no other dwelling but this; but if, after my death, someone wished to convert this wretched place into a hospital for the destitute, I pray beforehand that God may reward him."

This was, as she knew, a prophetic utterance, for a pious doctor, Wilhelm, son of that good Godfried de Haga, known as Sonder Danck, who had cared for her in her youth, fulfilled it after her death.

And to someone who, hearing that her death was near, asked her if God would work miracles at her tomb, she replied:

"I am quite aware that simple souls imagine my departure will be accompanied by extraordinary phenomena, but they are absolutely mistaken. As to what will happen after my burial, God alone knows and I do not want to know anything about it. I only request that my friends not exhume my remains until thirty years have gone by, and that my body which has not touched the earth for thirty-three years should not



touch it on my bier. And finally, I would like my funeral to take place as quickly as possible."

Such were her last wishes, and she communicated them to her friends and family surrounding her and who did not doubt, on hearing her express herself in this way, that her end was imminent. They were the more certain of it when, having gathered them around her bed, she said:

"I implore you to forgive me for the trouble I may have caused you; do not refuse me these thanks which I seek for the love of God; on my part I pray and will pray heartily for you."

All burst into tears, protesting that far from having troubled them she had, on the contrary, greatly enlightened them with her goodness and patience.

At last Palm Sunday came, and Lydwine abandoned her usual reserve with the Heavenly Spouse. He flooded her with such delight that she leaned against His heart and whispered: "Oh, how tired I am of living; take me away from here, my Lord, take me!"

Jesus smiled, and the Virgin and the twelve Apostles and a multitude of angels and saints appeared behind Him. Jesus placed himself at Lydwine's right side and Mary at her left; next to Christ a table appeared, on which was a cross, a lighted candle, and a small vessel; angels approached the bed and uncovered the patient. Then the Savior took the small vessel, which contained oil for the sick, and made the accustomed unctions without uttering a word; the angels covered her again; Jesus placed the candle in her hand and the crucifix before her eyes, and remained there, visible to her alone, until her death.

Lydwine said to Him humbly:

"My sweet Master, since You have deigned to abase Yourself to the most miserable of Your servants; since You have not shrunk from anointing my wretched body with Your most holy hands, be merciful to the end. Grant me my last request to suffer as much as I deserve, so that, at last exonerated from living, I may be allowed, without passing through Purgatory, to contemplate Your most loving Face."

And Jesus replied:

"Thy wishes are granted, my child; in two days you shall sing alleluia with your sisters, the virgins, in Paradise."

When the sun had risen around four o'clock in the morning, her confessor, Walter, visited her. He had been entranced in meditation during the night, and he had seen Lydwine, radiant with joy, among the angels. The room was perfumed when he entered.

"Oh!" cried he, "I know that your divine Spouse has just left; but



even if I did not know, I would have guessed it by inhaling the fragrant flowers of Eden! Has He announced to you your deliverance? Hide nothing from me, if it is possible, dear sister."

Transported with exhilaration, she exclaimed: "My suffering is going to intensify, but it will soon be over."

And indeed her stone and anthrax tortured her without relief, and she lived through Easter Monday in horrible agony. On Tuesday she prepared to die, and, as her room was full of people, she said gently:

"Leave me alone today with the child" — she pointed to her nephew Baudouin, sitting next to the bed — "if you are my friends do this for me. Do not worry; if I need you I will send the child to fetch you."

All believed that she wished to collect her thoughts and pray in peace, and not thinking that death was nigh, they went away. Jan Walter also left and went to the church to recite the vigils of the dead for the Mother Superior of the Convent of the Tertiary Sisters, who had just died. He had barely left when her agony began; it lasted from seven in the morning till four in the evening; her vomiting uprooted her and flung her, shattered, to the floor. She threw up greenish substances along with mouthfuls of bile; Baudouin scarcely had time to empty the basin outside before bringing it back again.

"O my child," she said to the little one who wept, "if the good Walter could see how I suffer!"

Baudouin exclaimed, "Aunt, do you want me to go and fetch him?"

She did not reply; she had lost consciousness.

Then the terrified child ran as fast as his legs could carry him to the church, which was so near the cottage that, going from one to the other, one could hardly recite the psalm "Miserere" three times. Walter hurried back and found the saint lifeless. He hoped she was only anesthetized by ecstasy; but he went to gather Lydwine's friends all the same, and they, not wishing to believe her dead, and ignorant that the Lord Himself had given her Extreme Unction with His own hands, as He did to Saint Anthony of Padua, asked her to make known to them by a sign if she desired to receive the last sacraments; but Lydwine did not stir. Then Walter lit a candle and placed it behind the saint's head fearing that the light would hurt her eyes, to see if she still breathed, and examined her closely. Doubt was no longer possible; she had ceased to live.

The women burst into sobs, but Catherine Simon, who held back her tears, enjoined them to be quiet.

"Let us see," said she, "if what Lydwine so often predicted to me, that her hands would clasp together after her death came true."



Her right arm had been consumed by the plague, and for years now, had hung from a thread. Although a surgeon had succeeded, with a nostrum of his own composition, in reinforcing it, he had not cured it or made it useful, and it was therefore humanly impossible for the two hands to come together and touch one another.

Catherine lifted the blanket and found that the fingers of both hands were interlaced on her chest; and she was also amazed to discover that the rough belt of horsehair no longer encircled her hips, but had been folded, without the strings that fastened it having been undone, and placed by her angel no doubt, near her shoulders at the head of the bed.

"I have touched that belt," says Brugman, "I have smelled the perfume that it exhales, and I affirm, having made use of it in exorcism, that it displayed an irresistible power against demons." "As for me," attests Michel d'Esne, "I have taken it in my own hands and know by experience that devils have a great horror and fear of it."

The night after Lydwine's death, Walter, who, overcome with grief, could not sleep, saw the soul of his penitent in the form of a white dove, with a gold-colored beak and breast, silver wings, and bright red feet. Brugman explains the symbolism of these colors as follows: the gold of the breast and beak signifies the excellence of her teachings and advice; the silver of the wings represents the flight of her contemplations; the scarlet of the feet indicates the placing of her walking in the blood-stained footsteps of Christ; the whiteness of the body allegorizes the brilliant purity of the blessed woman.

One of Walter's three sisters, who had watched over the body, saw in turn Lydwine's soul carried to heaven by angels; and Catherine Simon saw it enter her room, accompanied by a great number of the heavenly host, and she participated in the celestial wedding feast.

That same night, she appeared to holy girls everywhere who loved her without knowing her. She was dressed in white, crowned with roses by the Lord, and leading a chant of the sequence "*Jesu corona Virginum*," which the angels sang before the blessed Virgin, who placed a string of fiery gems around her neck and pressed her tenderly in her arms.

The next day, at dawn, Walter went to the house of mourning, knelt before the bed, and wept, his heart filled with sadness. Then he rose and said to his sisters and to Catherine Simon: "Lift the veil that covers the face of our friend." They obeyed, and a cry of amazement followed.

Lydwine had become what she had been before her illnesses, fresh and fair, young and plump; one would have thought it was a girl of seventeen, smiling in her sleep. There was not the least trace of the cleft in



the forehead, which had so disfigured her; her ulcers and sores had disappeared, except, however, the three scars from the wounds made by the Picardians, which ran like three threads of purple across the snow of her flesh.

All were astounded at this spectacle and eagerly inhaled a scent that they could not identify, so sustaining, so fortifying, that for two days and three nights they felt no need of sleep or nourishment.

Shortly there was an abundance of visitors, for as soon as the news was confirmed that the saint was dead, not only the inhabitants of Schiedam, but also those of Delft, Rotterdam, Leyden, and Brielle, passed in procession through the poor room.

À Kempis puts the number of pilgrims at several thousand and, along with Gerlac and Brugman, he relates that a woman living an evil life touched the neck of the deceased with her rosary, and that after her departure, the beads of her rosary had marked the skin with black spots, like drops of tar. The same effect, add her biographers, had been produced while she was still alive, for when her fingers had touched an impure hand they were immediately covered with blotches. Afterward, Walter forbade the visitors to touch the blessed remains with objects of piety or with cloths.

Moreover, he hastened to satisfy Lydwine's wishes that her body be quickly interred; but the magistrates of Schiedam would not allow this. "They did not dare to bury the body," says Michel d'Esne, "because the Count of Holland had said he was coming to see it."

It is a fact that all the minor potentates of Holland came to see the saint. We have noted her relations with Wilhelm VI, the Countess Marguerite, and Duke John of Bavaria. Philip, Duke of Burgundy and Count of Holland evidently knew her too, for he proposed to be present at her funeral. Only Jacqueline, the legitimate sovereign, is absent from the list. Owing to the perfidy of her uncles, she lived exiled from her dominions and wandered from one province to another, sometimes in prison, sometimes besieged in a stronghold. She must have known of Lydwine's existence, but though she could have gone to see the saint when she was at liberty and her enemies were not occupying Schiedam, she may not have cared to ask her advice or receive her counsel concerning her various marriages — counsel which would very certainly have displeased her. Still, her name is not once mentioned by the three historians.

To return to Lydwine: when Walter learned that the burgomasters had refused to authorize the burial, he was indignant and wanted to bypass them, but was forbidden, under pain of imprisonment and the



confiscation of his goods, to move the corpse. He was therefore forced to submit. Although Lydwine was not, in spite of her attachment to the sisters tertiary, admitted to the third order of Saint Francis — for Brugman, who was a Franciscan, would certainly have told us if she had been — they clothed her in a woolen robe and a girdle, like those of this order, and placed on her head a parchment cap, on which the names of Jesus and Mary were written in ink. Then Walter slipped a straw pillow under her head and, as she had desired, a little sachet containing what she called her “roses,” which were nothing else but the tears of coagulated blood she had so often shed. Walter used to detach them from her face when he went to her in the morning, and had put them away carefully in a little box that he kept at home.

She remained thus exposed for three days, and at last, as the Duke of Burgundy had advised the magistrates that they must not count on his presence, the order for burial was given.

On Friday morning, after a solemn service conducted under the presidency of Father Josse, the prior of canons of Brielle, whom may have been the one she beseeched to visit her after Easter, she was buried precisely at midday, in the southern part of the graveyard by the church.

According to her wishes that her remains not touch the earth, they placed wooden boards on the floor and walls of the grave; then they covered the tomb with bricks, in the form of a vault, and sealed it all with a large reddish stone two feet high, on which were traced crosses in vermilion. A year later, the clergy had a chapel of stone constructed over her tomb, which was connected by an opening into the church.

Lydwine was fifty-three years and some days old when she died, on the 18th of the calends of May (in other words, April 14th), the day of the Feast of Saint Tiburce and Saint Valerian, in the year of the Lord 1433, on the Tuesday in the octave of Easter, after vespers, at about four o'clock.

Miracles occurred without delay, and among those that are known we will mention three.

The first took place in Delft. A young girl, who had been bedridden for eight years, had been given up by the doctors, when one day Wilhelm, the son of Sonder Danck, who, like his father, practiced medicine, said to her, after admitting that her sickness was incurable:

“What are your sufferings in comparison with those that the blessed Lydwine, whom my father treated, endured? God now works, by her merits, numerous miracles in our country. Call upon her for help!”

The sick girl, thus instructed, implored the saint, who appeared to her and healed her.



The second miracle took place in Gouda. There was in the convent there a nun who had one leg shorter than the other, and it was so contracted that she could not walk. She asked to be taken to Delft to be examined by Wilhelm Sonder Danck, who had treated a friend of hers; but her superiors refused to grant her permission to leave. She was in despair, when Lydwine appeared in her cell during the night and invited her to urge the nuns to recite five paternosters and five aves each in honor of God and also for her, after which they were to take her down on the following Sunday into the chapel of the cloister, where she would recover her health. It happened as predicted; the lame woman left the church full of joy and completely cured.

The third miracle occurred in Leyden to the benefit of another nun, who, for eight years, had suffered from a cancerous tumor as big as an apple on her neck. She was allowed to make a pilgrimage to Lydwine's tomb barefoot and dressed in a simple woolen robe, without linen underneath. She went, but returned disappointed, for the tumor had not disappeared. She went to bed, imploring the saint not to despise her thus, and fell asleep. When she awoke the growth had gone and her neck was restored to health.

These miracles, which have been duly attested and have been made the subject of indepth inquiries, took place in 1448 under the pontificate of His Holiness Pope Nicolas V.

Originally published as *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* (1901).



# A Select Chronology of Fin-de-Siècle France

- 1870** Franco-Prussian War: declaration of war by Ollivier government; swift defeat of French at Sedan; MacMahon's army capitulates; Napoleon III captured.  
Fall of the Second Empire and proclamation of the Third Republic: Thiers and bourgeois Republicans claim power.  
Paper money is introduced with the twenty-five franc note.  
Lautréamont, *Poems*.  
Taine, *On Intelligence*.  
Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *La Révolte* (prose drama in one act).  
Verlaine, *La Bonne chanson*.  
Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*.  
Courbet, *Mer orageuse*.  
Corot, *Le Pont de Mantes*.  
Pissaro, *Les Sapins, à Louveciennes*.  
Wagner, *Die Walküre*.  
Delibes, *Coppélia*.  
Death of Jules de Goncourt, Mérimée, Lautréamont, and Alexandre Dumas père.
- 1871** Paris capitulates; armistice with Germany; Thiers elected president of the Republic.  
Paris Commune: led by the National Guard Federation, insurgents revolt in Paris, seizing weapons and control of the city for seventy-three days; Republican government withdraws to Versailles; election of the Commune; program of the Commune outlined in *Déclaration au Peuple Français*; National Assembly signs treaty of Frankfurt, transferring Alsace and Lorraine to Germany; destruction of Vendôme Column.  
Defeat of the Commune: Versaillais reenter city; 30,000 Communards killed during the "Bloody Week"; 40,000 survivors arrested and deported to New Caledonia; where they are interned for nine years; Courbet imprisoned.  
Mendès, *The 73 Days of the Commune*.  
Zola, *The Fortune of the Rougons* (first novel in the Rougon-Macquart cycle: "the natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire").  
Rimbaud, *Le Bateau ivre*.  
Bizet, *Petite suite*.



- Pissaro, *Crystal Palace, London*.  
 Darwin, *The Descent of Man*.  
 Birth of Proust and Valéry.
- 1872 Zola, *La Curée*.  
 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.  
 Banville, *Short Treatise on French Poetry*.  
 Hugo, *L'Année terrible*.  
 Monet, *Impression – Sunrise*.  
 Corot, *Mademoiselle de Foudras*.  
 Degas, *Le Foyer de la danse à l'Opéra de la rue Le Pelletier*.  
 Death of Gautier.
- 1873 Thiers resigns; MacMahon, Duc de Magenta, becomes president of the Republic; end of German occupation of France; attempts to restore the monarchy fail when the Comte de Chambord, the last Bourbon pretender, refuses to recognize the *tricolore* as the French flag; law of the *septennat* (seven-year term of the presidency).  
 Remington & Sons begins manufacturing typewriters.  
 Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*.  
 Verlaine, *Art poétique* (1871–73).  
 Hugo, *Quatre-vingt-treize*.  
 Pater, *The Renaissance*.  
 Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*.  
 Zola, *The Fat and the Thin*.  
 Manet, *Gare Saint-Lazare*.  
 Delibes, *Le Roi l'a Dit*.  
 Birth of Jarry.  
 Death of Napoleon III.
- 1874 Defeat of Broglie's government; child labor law passed, banning work for children under twelve.  
 Bon Marché department store, designed by Eiffel and Boileau, opens in Paris.  
 First annual Impressionist exhibition opens in Nadar's photography studios; only Manet is not represented; his painting *The Railroad* accepted in the Salon of 1874.  
 Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Les Diaboliques*.  
 Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.  
 Huysmans, *Dish of Spices*.  
 Ribot, *La Philosophie de Schopenhauer*.  
 Verlaine, *Romances sans paroles*.  
 Verne, *Mysterious Island*.  
 Moreau, *Messalina and Salome Dancing*.



- 1875 Constitution of 1875: three laws definitively establish France as a Republic; dissolution of the National Assembly.  
 Paris Opera, designed by Garnier, opens (1861-75).  
 Taine, *The Origins of Contemporary France* (1875-93).  
 Zola, *The Sin of Father Mouret*.  
 Monet, *Boating at Argenteuil*.  
 Moreau, *Mystic Flower*.  
 Saint-Saëns, *Danse macabre*.  
 Bizet, *Carmen*.  
 Death of Corot and Bizet.
- 1876 Dissolution of First International (Philadelphia).  
 Bell invents the telephone.  
 Construction begins on Abadie's Sacré-Coeur.  
 Inauguration of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in August with the first complete performance of Wagner's *The Ring*.  
 Second Impressionist exhibition; neither Manet nor Cézanne participate.  
 Huysmans, *Marthe*.  
 Mallarmé, *The Afternoon of a Faun*.  
 Paul Regnard and Desire Magloire Bourneville, eds., *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1876-80).  
 Zola, *His Excellency Eugène Rougon*.  
 Degas, *Absinthe*.  
 Delibes, *Sylvia*.  
 Manet, *Portrait of Stéphane Mallarmé*.  
 Moreau, *Salome* and *The Apparition*; both paintings appear in the Salon.  
 Renoir, *Au Théâtre* and *Le Bal du Moulin de la Galette*.  
 Rops, *The Absinthe Drinker*.  
 Wagner, *Siegfried*.  
 Death of Sand.
- 1877 Dissolution of Chamber by MacMahon; Republican victory in legislative elections; Broglie government.  
 Third Impressionist exhibition; only Manet not represented.  
 Edison invents the phonograph.  
 Flaubert, *Three Tales*.  
 Edmond de Goncourt, *La Fille Elisa*.  
 Zola, *L'Assommoir*.  
 Huysmans, "Emile Zola et *L'Assommoir*."  
 Rodin, *The Bronze Age*.  
 Saint-Saëns, *Samson and Delila*.  
 Death of Thiers and Courbet.



- 1878 Universal Exhibition in Paris: Trocadero designed by Davioud; Gallery of the Machines designed by H. de Dion, with vestibule by Eiffel.  
 Charcot begins experimenting with hypnosis at the Salpêtrière.  
 Claude Bernard, *La Science expérimentale*.  
 Duret, *Les Peintres impressionnistes*.  
 Huysmans, *Pack on Back*.  
 Pasteur, *Les Microbes*.  
 Zola, *A Love Affair*.  
 Death of Bernard, physiologist and pharmacologist.
- 1879 Resignation of MacMahon; Grévy becomes president of the Republic.  
*La Marseillaise* reinstated as the national anthem.  
 Edison perfects the incandescent light bulb.  
 Fourth Impressionist exhibition.  
 Huysmans, *The Vatarad Sisters*.  
 Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror* released by publisher in Belgium.  
 Redon, *Dans le rêve*; first collection of lithographs.  
 Rodin, *John the Baptist*.  
 Rops illustrates *Les Diaboliques* by Barbey d'Aurevilly.
- 1880 Amnesty granted to the Communards; definitive adoption of the *tricolore*; first ministry of Ferry; Camille Sée law passed, guarantees secondary education for girls.  
 Pasteur discovers streptococcus.  
 Physical fitness classes become mandatory in schools.  
 Fifth Impressionist exhibition.  
 Huysmans, *Parisian Sketches*.  
 Maupassant, *Boule de suif*.  
 Mendès, *Les Mères ennemies*.  
 Rachilde, *Monsieur de la nouveauté*.  
 Taine, *Philosophy of Art*.  
 Zola, *Nana* and *The Experimental Novel*; 45,000 copies of *Nana* sold on publication day.  
*Les Soirées de Médan* (a collection of naturalist stories, including works by Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans).  
 Mendès founds *La Vie Populaire*.  
 Mallarmé's *mardis* begin.  
 Rodin, *The Thinker* and *Gates of Hell* (1880-1917).  
 Moreau, *Woman and Panther* and *Galatea* (1880-81).  
 Death of Flaubert.
- 1881 Fall of Ferry; ministry of Gambetta; primary education in France made free, compulsory, and secular; freedom of the press law.  
 Paris and Lyons are connected by direct telegraphic wire.



- Pasteur develops anthrax vaccine.  
 Opening of Le Chat Noir cabaret.  
 Sixth Impressionist exhibition.  
 Jules Claretie, *Les Amours d'un interne*.  
 Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (posthumous).  
 Huysmans, *En ménage*.  
 Maupassant, *La Maison Tellier*.  
 Mendès, *Le Roi vierge*.  
 Verlaine, *Sagesse*.  
 Zola, *The Naturalist Novelists*.  
 Renoir, *The Luncheon of the Boating Party*.  
 Cézanne, *Self-Portrait*.
- 1882 Fall of Gambetta.  
 Charcot and Magnan begin to describe cases of fetishism.  
 The Wax Museum Grévin opens in Paris.  
 Retrospective of Courbet at the *Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts*.  
 Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Une Histoire sans nom*.  
 Charcot, *Essai d'une distinction nosographique des divers états compris sous le nom d'Hypnotisme*.  
 Huysmans, *Down Stream*.  
 Lorrain, *Le Sang des dieux* (with a frontispiece by Gustave Moreau).  
 Maupassant, *Mademoiselle Fifi*.  
 Mendès, *Monstres parisiens*.  
 Richer and Gilles de La Tourette, eds. *Nouvelle Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*.  
 Zola, *Piping Hot!*  
 Gounod, *The Redemption*.  
 Manet, *The Bar at the Folies-Bergères*.  
 Redon, *For Edgar Poe*.  
 Renoir, *A Bather*.  
 Wagner, *Parsifal* premiered at Bayreuth.
- 1883 Second ministry of Ferry.  
 Orient Express first runs.  
 Charcot establishes Bibliothèque Diabolique at the Salpêtrière, devoted to collecting documents on Satanism.  
 Printemps is first Parisian department store with electric lighting.  
 Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Ce qui ne meurt pas*.  
 Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*.  
 Huysmans, *L'Art moderne* (a defense of Impressionism with praise for Moreau and Redon).  
 Lorrain, *La Forêt bleue*.



Loti, *Mon Frère Yves*.

Maupassant, *Une vie* and *Contes de la bécasse*.

Mendès, *Les Folies amoureuses*.

Ribot, *Les Maladies de la volonté*.

Rollinat, *Les Névroses*.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Contes cruels*.

Zola, *The Ladies Paradise*.

Renoir, *Dancing at Bougival*.

Puvis de Chavannes, *The Dream*.

Death of Wagner, Marx, and Manet.

1884 The Naquet law legalizes divorce; trade unions legalized.

Retrospective of Manet at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

Huysmans, *Against Nature*.

Maupassant, *Miss Harriet*.

Mendès, *La Légende du Parnasse contemporain*.

Morèas, *Les Syrtes*.

Péladan, *Le Vice suprême*, with a preface by Barbey d'Aurevilly and a frontispiece by Rops.

Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*.

Verlaine, *Les Poètes maudits*.

Massenet, *Manon*.

Moreau, *Sappho Flinging Herself into the Sea*.

Renoir, *Les Grandes Baigneuses* (1884-87).

1885 Jules Grévy reelected president of the Republic.

First issue of *La Revue Wagnérienne* is published by Dujardin, de Wyzewa, and Chamberlain.

Freud studies with Charcot; foundation of the Society of Physiological Psychology under the direction of Charcot.

Pasteur gives the first inoculation against rabies and works on hydrophobia vaccine.

Statue of Liberty by Bartholdi is sent to New York.

Beauclair and Vicaire, *Les Délivrescences d'Adoré Floupette*, poèmes décadents.

Bourget, *Nouveau Essais de psychologie contemporaine*.

Charcot, *Etude des centres fonctionnels du cerveau*.

Laforge, *Les Complaintes*.

Lorrain, *Modernités* and *Viviane*.

Mallarmé, "Prose pour des Esseintes."

Maupassant, *Bel-Ami* and *Yvette*.

Rachilde, *Nono*.

Richer, *Etudes cliniques sur la grande hystérie, ou, Hystéroépilepsie*.

Zola, *Germinal*.



- Degas, *Woman Bathing*.  
 Van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*.  
 Death of Victor Hugo.
- 1886 "Boulangism": General Boulanger becomes minister of war; achieves a popular triumph by refusing to intervene in a 109-day strike at Decazeville.  
 Freud translates Charcot's *Leçons sur les maladies du système nerveux*.  
 Telephone lines link Paris and Brussels.  
 Last Impressionist exhibition.  
 Anatole Baju publishes the first issue of *Le Décadent*.  
 Bloy, *Le Désespéré*.  
 Charcot, *Oeuvres complètes* (1886–93).  
 Jules Déjerine, *L'Hérédité dans les maladies du système nerveux*.  
 Drumont, *Jewish France*.  
 Gourmont, *Merlette*.  
 Huysmans, *A Haven*.  
 Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*.  
 Lorrain, *Très Russe*.  
 Mendès, *Zo'har*, *Lesbia*, and *Richard Wagner*.  
 Mirbeau, *Le Calvaire*.  
 Moréas and Adam, *Demoiselles Goubert*; *Le Thé chez Miranda*.  
 Moréas and Kahn found *Le Symboliste*.  
 Moréas publishes the "Le Manifeste du Symbolisme" (*Figaro*, September 18).  
 Moréas, *Les Cantilènes*.  
 Péladan, *Curieuse!*  
 Rachilde, *A mort*.  
 Alice Regnault, *Mademoiselle Pomme*.  
 Rimbaud, *Illuminations* (edited by Verlaine).  
 Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *The Future Eve*, *L'Amour suprême*, and *Akëdysséril*.  
 Zola, *The Masterpiece*.  
 Degas, *The Tub*.  
 Rodin, *The Kiss*.  
 Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–86).  
 Satie, *Ogives*.
- 1887 General Boulanger is forced to resign; crowds blockade the Gare de Lyon in protest; scandal involving sales of honors forces President Grévy to resign; Sadi Carnot elected president.  
 Construction begins on the Eiffel Tower.  
 In "Le Fétichisme dans l'amour," Alfred Binet first proposes the term "fetishism" as a medical category.



Marey experiments with chronophotography.

Baju, *L'Ecole décadente*.

Charcot and Richer, *Les Démoniaques dans l'art*.

Charcot, *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière* (1887-88).

Goncourt, *Journal*.

Laforge, *Six Moral Tales*.

Mallarmé, *Poésies*.

Maupassant, *Le Horla* and *Mont-Oriol*.

Mendès, *La Première Maîtresse*.

Péladan, *L'Initiation sentimentale*, with a frontispiece by Rops.

Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade*.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Tribulat Bonhomet*.

Zola, *The Earth*.

Toulouse-Lautrec, *Portrait of Van Gogh*.

Andre Brouillet, *Dr. Charcot Lecturing at the Salpêtrière*.

Death of Laforge.

1888 Boulanger is dismissed from the army.

Burroughs invents adding machine.

Chair of experimental psychology established at Collège de France.

Founding of Pasteur Institute in Paris.

First salon of the Rose & Cross.

Anatole France appointed literary editor of the Republican daily *Le Temps*.

Barrès, *Under the Eyes of the Barbarians*.

Lorrain, *Dans l'oratoire*.

Maupassant, *Pierre et Jean*.

Mirbeau, *L'Abbé Jules*.

Péladan, *A Coeur perdu*, *Istar*, and *L'Art ochlocratique: Salons de 1882 et de 1883*.

Plowert (Paul Adam), *Petit glossaire pour servir à l'intelligence des auteurs décadents et symbolistes*.

Rachilde, *Madame Adonis*.

Verlaine, *Les Poètes maudits*.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Histoires insolites* and *Nouveaux contes cruels*.

Van Gogh, *Sunflowers*.

Rops, *L'Amante du Christe*.

Satie, *Gymnopédies*.

1889 Centenary of the Revolution celebrated with International Exhibition and inauguration of the Eiffel Tower; first May Day celebration in Paris; failure of coup d'état by General Boulanger; Republican victory.

Formation of Second International in Paris.

Founding of the National Anti-Semitic League of France.



- First postcards.  
 Opening of the Moulin-Rouge.  
*Mercure de France* founded by Rachilde, Gourmont, and Vallette.  
 Exhibition of Monet and Rodin, and first exhibition of Gauguin and Symbolist painters at the Café Volpini.  
 Redon illustrates Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.  
 Baju publishes last issue of *Le Décadent*.  
 Barrès, *A Free Man*.  
 Bergson, *Time and Free Will*.  
 Bourget, *Le Disciple*.  
 Gilles de la Tourette, *L'Hypnotisme et les états analogues au point de vue médico-légal*.  
 Huysmans, *Certains*.  
 Janet, *L'Automatisme psychologique*.  
 Maupassant, *Fort comme la mort*.  
 Moréas, *Les Premières armes du symbolisme*.  
 Péladan, *La Victoire du mari* (with a commemoration by Barbey d'Aurevilly).  
 Rachilde, *Le Mordu*.  
 Stendhal, *Lamiel* (posthumous).  
 Wilde, "The Decay of Lying."  
 Rodin, *The Thinker*.  
 Toulouse-Lautrec, *The Drinking Woman, or Hangover*.  
 Death of Barbey d'Aurevilly and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (Mallarmé and Huysmans named executors of Villiers will).
- 1890 Increasing popular unrest; first violent May Day demonstrations.  
 Success of the can-can at the Bal du Moulin-Rouge.  
 Redon illustrates Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*.  
 Rodin sculpts a bust of Mirbeau.  
 Gourmont, *Sixtine, roman de la vie cérébrale*.  
 Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror* reedited and published in Paris.  
 Mallarmé, *Villiers de l'Isle Adam*.  
 Maupassant, *Notre coeur* and *Inutile Beauté*.  
 Mendès, *Méphistophéla*.  
 Mirbeau, *Sébastien Roch*.  
 Péladan, *Coeur en peine*.  
 Verlaine, *Parallèlement*.  
 Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Axël* (posthumous).  
 Zola, *La Bête humaine*.  
 Toulouse-Lautrec, *La Dance au Moulin-Rouge*.  
 Moreau, *Orpheus at the Tomb of Eurydice*.  
 Suicide of Van Gogh.



- 1891 Suicide of Boulanger in a Brussels cemetery.  
 Foundation of the *Société de la Rose & Croix esthétique*, with Péladan as one of its leaders; "Manifesto of the Rose & Cross" appears.  
 Moréas breaks with symbolists and founds "*l'école romane*" with Maurras and Raynaud.  
 Panhard and Levassor build first gasoline-fueled automobile.  
 Invention of the inflatable tire by the Michelin brothers.  
 First Toulouse-Lautrec poster (for the Moulin-Rouge).  
 Gourmont, "Le Joujou patriotisme."  
 Barrès, *Le Jardin de Bérénice*.  
 Huysmans, *Là-bas*.  
 Lorrain, *Sonyeuse* and *Soirs de province, soirs de Paris*.  
 Maeterlinck, *Pelléas et Mélisande*.  
 Moréas, *Le Pèlerin passionné*.  
 Péladan, *L'Androgyne* and *Le Gynandre*.  
 Rachilde, *La Sanglante ironie*.  
 Gilles de la Tourette, *Traité clinique de l'hystérie, d'après l'enseignement de la Salpêtrière* (1891-95).  
 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Intentions*.  
 Zola, *Money* (50,000 copies sold in several days).  
 Puvis de Chavannes, *Summer*.  
 Monet, *Les Nymphéas*.  
 Seurat, *Le Cirque*.  
 Death of Rimbaud.
- 1892 To the despair of royalists, an encyclical letter from Leo XIII, *Au Milieu des Sollicitudes*, urges Catholics to rally to the Republic — the *ralliement*; anarchist bomb scares; execution of Ravachol, the "Christ of Anarchy"; Child labor law passed, banning work for children under thirteen and limiting the work day to ten hours for those under sixteen, eleven hours for women, and twelve hours for men.  
 Panama Canal Company scandal.  
 Wilde's *Salome* with Sarah Bernhardt is banned by British censors.  
 Bloy, *Le Salut par les Juifs*.  
 Charcot, *La Foi qui guérit*.  
 Gourmont, *Lilith*, *Litanies de la Rose*, and *Le Latin mystique* (preface by Huysmans).  
 Janet, *The Mental State of Hystericals*, vol. 1 (preface by Charcot).  
 Nordeau, *Entartung* (translated into French as *Dégénérescence* in 1894).  
 Péladan, *Comment on devient Mage, éthique*.  
 Zola, *The Debacle*.



- Monet begins *Rouen Cathedral* series (1892-94).  
 Toulouse-Lautrec, *At the Moulin-Rouge*.
- 1893 The anarchist Vaillant bombs the Chamber of Deputies.  
 Sarah Bernhardt plays the title role in Wilde's French *Salomé*.  
 Azam, *Hypnotism and double conscience*.  
 Freud, *Charcot*.  
 Bourget, *Cosmopolis*.  
 Gourmont, *Le Fantôme* and *L'Idéalisme*.  
 Lorrain, *Buveurs d'âmes*.  
 Péladan, *Comment on devient Fée, érotique*.  
 Rachilde, *L'Animale*.  
 Zola, *Doctor Pascal* (last volume of the Rougon-Macquart series).  
 Death of Taine, Charcot, and Maupassant.
- 1894 Anarchist bombings continue in February and April; Sadi Carnot, president of the Republic is assassinated in Lyons by the Italian anarchist Caserio; Casimir Périer becomes president.  
 The Dreyfus Affair: condemnation and arrest of Captain Dreyfus for treason; he is sentenced to solitary confinement for life on Devil's Island.  
 The term "art nouveau" is coined.  
 Sewer system is installed throughout Paris.  
 Marconi experiments with wireless.  
 First automobile races on 125 km run between Paris and Rouen (average speed: 14 mph).  
 Mucha makes posters for Sarah Bernhardt.  
 First issues of the *Yellow Book* published, with illustrations by Steer, Sickert, Conder, Max Beerbohm, and Beardsley.  
 Barrès, *Du Sang, de la Volupté et de la Mort*.  
 Bloy, *Histoires désobligeantes*.  
 Daudet, *Les Morticoles*.  
 Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*.  
 Gourmont, *Histoires magiques*.  
 Janet, *Les Accidents mentaux*.  
 Mendès, *La Maison de la Vielle*.  
 Moréas, *Eriphyle*.  
 Zola, *The Three Cities*.  
 Debussy, *The Afternoon of a Faun*.
- 1895 Félix Faure becomes president of the Republic after Périer resigns;  
 Radical cabinet of Léon Bourgeois takes office and announces program of "solidarism"; founding of the General Confederation of Labor.  
 Oscar Wilde is tried, convicted, and sentenced to two years' hard labor.  
 Repression of uprising in Madagascar.



Röntgen experiments with X ray.  
 Lumière brothers project the first film in Paris.  
 Breuer and Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*.  
 Gabriel de Tarde, *Les Lois de l'imitation*.  
 Huysmans, *En route*.  
 Le Bon, *The Crowd* and *A Study of the Popular Mind*.  
 Lorrain, *Sensations et souvenirs*.  
 Péladan, *Le Théâtre complet de Wagner*.  
 Verlaine, *Confessions*.  
 Wilde, *The Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.  
 Death of Pasteur.

1896 Commandant Walsin Esterházy identified as the author of the anonymous letter at the heart of the Dreyfus Affair; conservative Méline elected prime minister; one million onlookers turn out for the state visit of Tsar Nicholas II, which also brings rapprochement with Russia; annexation of Madagascar.

Grand-Guignol Theater opens in Paris.  
 Ford constructs his first automobile, the quadricycle.  
 First film by Méliès, *Le Manoir du Diable*.  
 Laboratory of psychopathology is established at the Faculté de Médecine in Paris.  
 Bergson, *Matter and Memory*.  
 Gourmont, *The Book of Masks* (2 vols., 1896-98).  
 Jarry, *Ubu roi*.  
 Bernard Lazare, *A Judicial Error: The Truth about the Dreyfus Affair*.  
 Lorrain, *Une femme par jour*.  
 Louÿs, *Aphrodite: mœurs antiques*.  
 Mendès, *Gog*.  
 Proust, *Pleasures and Days*.  
 Ribot, *La Psychologie des sentiments*.  
 Valéry, *An Evening with Mr. Teste*.  
 Birth of Artaud.

Death of Verlaine and Edmond de Goncourt.  
 1897 First airplane flight (200 meters); electric tramway opens in London.  
 Perrin and Röntgen discover the cathode ray.  
 Barrès, *The Uprooted*.  
 Bloy, *La Femme pauvre*.  
 Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*.  
 Gide, *The Fruits of the Earth*.  
 Gourmont, *Les Chevaux de Diomède*.  
 Lorrain, *Monsieur de Bougreton*, *Contes pour lire à la chandelle*, and *Lorelei*.



- Loti, *Ramuntcho*.  
 Mallarmé, *Divagations* and *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Eliminate Chance*.  
 Rachilde, *Les Hors nature*.  
 Matisse, *Dinner Table*.  
 Rodin, *Victor Hugo*.
- 1898 Zola, publishes *J'accuse* in *L'Aurore* after Esterházy is acquitted; Zola prosecuted and forced to take flight for England; widespread anti-Semitic violence in France; founding of pro-Dreyfus League of the Rights of Man; founding of the anti-Dreyfus League of the French Fatherland.  
 Pierre and Marie Curie discover radium and polonium.  
 Construction begins on the Paris Métro.  
 Atget begins photographing Paris.  
 Gourmont, *D'un pays lointain*.  
 Huysmans, *The Cathedral* (17,000 copies sold in first two weeks).  
 Lorrain, *Ma petite ville* and *La Dame turque*.  
 Louÿs, *La Femme et le pantin*.  
 Mendès, *Le Chercheur de tares*.  
 Rachilde, *L'Heure sexuelle*.  
 Braque, *La Clanque* and *Le Vallon*.  
 Rodin, *Balzac* and *The Kiss*.  
 Death of Moreau, Rops, and Mallarmé.
- 1899 Emile Loubet elected president of the Republic; following demands of Clemenceau and Jaurès, Dreyfus is finally brought to Rennes for second trial and found guilty with "extenuating circumstances"; a pardon is offered by the government.  
 Méliès films *L'Affaire Dreyfus*.  
 First Nobel Prize in literature, awarded to Sully-Prud'homme.  
 Maurras founds the monarchist-Catholic movement Action Française.  
 Bergson, *On Laughter*.  
 Gourmont, *Le Songe d'une femme* and *L'Esthétique de la langue française*.  
 Mirbeau, *The Torture Garden*.  
 Rachilde, *La Tour d'amour*.  
 Zola, *Fruitfulness*.  
 Ravel, *Pavane pour une infante défunte*.  
 Berlioz, *The Trojans at Carthage*.  
 Death of Faure.
- 1900 Universal Exhibition and the Olympic Games are held in Paris; labor law passed limiting work week to sixty hours.  
 Inauguration of Paris Métro line no. 1; Guimard designs Métro entrances.  
 Jeanne Chauvin becomes the first female lawyer in France.



Construction of the Grand and Petit Palais in Paris.

Colette, *Claudine à l'école*.

Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Gourmont, *La Culture des idées*.

Lorrain, *Histoires de masques* and *Vingt femmes*.

Mirbeau, *The Diary of a Chambermaid* and *La 628-E8*.

Péladan, *La Vertu suprême*.

Rachilde, *The Juggler*.

Mondrian, *Self-Portrait*.

Death of Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde.

1901 Founding of Radical Socialist Party.

Founding of the Société Française de Prophylaxie Sanitaire et Morale.

Picasso's first exhibition.

Rodin illustrates *The Torture Garden* by Mirbeau.

Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

Huysmans, *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam*.

Jarry, *Messaline, Roman de l'ancienne Rome*, and *Le Surmâle*.

Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*.

Mirbeau, *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*.

Liane de Pougy, *L'Idylle saphique*.

Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*.

Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*.



# Biographies

**JULES-AMÉDÉE BARBEY D'AUREVILLY** was born in Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte, Normandy, on November 2, 1808, into an impoverished branch of an old noble family. As a child he read Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron and dreamed of becoming a writer, but he submitted to his father's wishes that he study law. He was sent to school in Paris but soon abandoned his legal studies to write, and his literary production included novels, stories, criticism, and treatises on dandyism. Barbey modeled himself after the dandy Beau Brummell (whom he had once seen when Brummell was the British consul at Caen) and squandered his small inheritance on expensive clothing and accessories. He would spend hours each day on his appearance, elaborately styling, and later dyeing, his hair and applying makeup. His wardrobe was famous for its lavishness and originality: padded undergarments, tightly laced corsets, brightly colored vests, ruffled frock coats, large cloaks, and wide-brimmed black hats lined in red velvet. Even his manuscripts were ornate, written in various colored inks to mark stylistic and thematic shifts. "I have always put my passions above my principles," he once remarked, and lived accordingly. He had the reputation of being a debauched eccentric: he used drugs, drank heavily, and had an affair with a woman named La Vellini, whom he described as a real life "diabolique." In 1851 he managed, at least for a while, to forsake his "red mistress" (that is, wine) for his "white angel," Mme de Bouglon, a young widow he loved and hoped to marry. When the wedding never came off, he returned to his dissolute life. As a critic he became famous for his hatred of the modern world, his reactionary politics, his idiosyncratic Catholicism, and his unpopular literary taste. While he praised Balzac, Stendhal, and Baudelaire, he advised Flaubert to quit writing and despised Victor Hugo. When Hugo remarked, "Barbey d'Aurevilly: gigantic imbecile," Barbey responded, "'Barbey d'Aurevilly: gigantic imbecile' is the most beautiful line Hugo has ever written." When *Les Diaboliques* was published (and seized on the grounds that it was a danger to public morals) Barbey received instant notoriety as well as the admiration of a group of younger writers, which included Lorrain, Huysmans, Villiers, and Péladan, among whom he was known as "the Constable." He spent the last three decades of his life in a small apartment at 25, Rue Rousselet, with an entire room devoted to his enormous wardrobe. When in his seventies, he became involved with a girl of eighteen, a Jewish actress who alleviated his loneliness and his disappointment in a career that had not lived up to his expectations. Barbey died at home on April 23, 1889, at the age of eighty.



REMY DE GOURMONT was born into a poor aristocratic family on April 4, 1858, in Bazoches au Houlme, Normandy. At eighteen he was sent to Caen to study law, but soon quit to pursue a literary career in Paris. He worked as an assistant librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he discovered unpublished fragments of Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*, which he recopied and had published. At the library, he met Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who introduced him to Mallarmé and Huysmans. Gourmont brought Huysmans together with Berthe de Courrière, a woman twice certified insane and a habitué of the occult scene, who acted as tour guide for the novelist when he was researching satanism for *Là-bas*. Courrière remained devoted to Gourmont until his death, and he bequeathed his manuscripts and extensive library to her. Huysmans, who credits Gourmont for doing all of his library research on satanism, would pass by the library every day after work to pick up Gourmont, and the two men would walk home together. In 1889, along with Rachilde and her husband, Alfred Valette, Gourmont founded *Le Mercure de France* and was one of its most prolific contributors until his death twenty-six years later. In 1891, Gourmont was fired from the Bibliothèque Nationale for writing "Le Joujou patriotisme," an article in which he criticized French nationalism. In spite of support from Mirbeau and Mendès, he was blacklisted by the mainstream Parisian press. That same year he was afflicted with tubercular lupus, which disfigured his face, and he became a recluse. Only Natalie Clifford Barney, an American poet and socialite who was openly lesbian, succeeded in getting him away from his book-lined apartment at 71, Rue des Saints-Pères. His passion and absolute submission to her ("All I want is to love and to serve you") is recorded in *Letters to the Amazon* and *Intimate Letters to the Amazon*, which were published in monthly installments in *Le Mercure* from January 1912 to October 1913. Gourmont died of a stroke on September 27, 1915, leaving behind more than sixty volumes of work in nearly every genre.

JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS was born Charles-Marie-Georges Huysmans in Paris on February 5, 1848. His mother was a French schoolteacher and his father a Dutch lithographer. He was called Georges by his family and friends; Joris-Karl and the initials were a later invention of his own. His father died when he was eight, and less than a year later his mother remarried a Protestant bookbinder, with whom she had two daughters. In 1866 he passed his exams for the baccalaureate and that same year took a job as a civil servant with the Ministry of the Interior, a position he held until 1898, and for which he was awarded the Chevalier Légion d'Honneur (he was promoted to the rank of officier in 1907 for his literary achievement). (The manuscript of *Against Nature* even includes a number of pages written on Ministry stationery.) Like many other writers of the time, he began, but never completed, law school. In 1870 he was drafted to fight in the Franco-Prussian War, but poor health kept him in military hospitals for the duration of the conflict.



For much of his life he was plagued by nervous ailments, rheumatism, dyspepsia, dysentery, gonorrhea, toothache, and impotency, which he tried, without great success, to cure in brothels. His first book, a collection of prose pieces called *Dish of Spices*, was published at his own expense in 1874 after it was rejected by numerous publishers. Huysmans became one of Zola's disciples, and his first novels were naturalist. Around this same time he became romantically involved with Anna Meunier, an ex-prostitute and a dress shop owner who was ultimately committed to an insane asylum. Huysmans visited her every week until her death in 1893. Dissatisfied with what he felt were the limitations of Zola's naturalism, Huysmans wrote his most famous book, *Against Nature*, which firmly established him in the literary world. Among his friends were Mallarmé, Barbey, Lorrain, Gourmont, Verlaine, Bloy, and Villiers. While researching satanism for his 1891 novel *Là-bas*, Huysmans attended séances and the heretical ceremonies of Abbé Boullan, a defrocked priest. In July 1892 he retreated to a Trappist monastery in Ligugé, where he converted to Catholicism. In 1901, the year in which he published *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam*, Huysmans became a monk and spent two years as a Benedictine oblate. When French law established the separation of church and state, he was forced to return to secular life in Paris. A few years later he suffered a terminal illness almost as horrific as that of Saint Lydwine, which he bore with great fortitude (even writing out the invitations to his own funeral). The excruciating toothaches that had plagued him for years were diagnosed as cancer of the jaw, and when the roof of his mouth began to decompose, François Copée remarked, "Huysmans! He described himself when he wrote of Saint Lydwine." Huysmans died on May 15, 1907, and was buried in his monk's robe in the Montparnasse Cemetery near Anna Meunier's grave. In his will he asked that his work be destroyed; the courts, however, overruled his wishes.

JEAN LORRAIN, the pseudonym for Paul Duval, was born in Fécamp, the birthplace of his more famous colleague, Guy de Maupassant. Charles Swinburne lived nearby, and while Lorrain never met him, he was deeply influenced by the stories that circulated about the Englishman's eccentricities. Lorrain was sent to study law in Paris, but soon gave it up to pursue a literary career. His father agreed to support him on the condition that he write under a pseudonym. By 1880 he had settled in Montmartre and was a regular at the Chat Noir, where he met and socialized with Verlaine and Moréas and was soon a follower of the literary satanists, the Hydropaths and the Zutistes. Lorrain, who wore makeup, gardenias, jewelry, and perfume and painted his nails, was openly homosexual; when a journalist asked him if he ever desired a woman, he responded, "Yes! for the vice of it!" In 1883 he met Barbey d'Aurevilly, then in his seventies, and Lorrain became one of his disciples. Barbey referred to the young writer, much to Lorrain's delight, as "Monsieur, the slut." In 1883 he met Huysmans, and together



they explored the occult circles and "sodomite milieux" of Paris; their friendship faltered when Huysmans became religious. Like his close friend Rachilde, Lorrain was also dubbed "Mademoiselle Baudelaire" (by Paul Bourget). By the 1890s Lorrain had succeeded in becoming one of the most prominent and best paid journalists in Paris, famous for his vicious reviews. One of them spurred the young Proust into challenging Lorrain to a duel, which took place without incident. Maupassant, too, had challenged Lorrain, but their duel never occurred. Lorrain suffered from syphilis and drank ether, which ulcerated his stomach. His financial situation took a turn for the worse when the Symbolist painter Jeanne Jacquemin sued him for defamation of character and the court ordered Lorrain to pay punitive damages. His 1901 novel *Monsieur de Phocas* brought on a second lawsuit, this time for "corrupting public morals by literary means." With the exception of Colette, the literary world did not come to his defense, and the last ten years of his life were overshadowed by financial worries and failing health. Well before his death in 1906, Jean Lorrain, the quintessential fin-de-siècle figure, was painfully out of fashion. On June 28 of that year, he was found unconscious on his bathroom floor, having perforated his colon while giving himself an enema. He died in the hospital two days later, never having regained consciousness.

GUY DE MAUPASSANT was born on August 5, 1850, in Normandy. The precise location is still disputed, with both Fécamp and the nearby Château de Miromesnil claiming the honor. His childhood was marked by the unhappy marriage of his parents, who separated in 1862. He was sent to Catholic school but was expelled in 1872 for antireligious sentiments. He started, but never completed, law school and in 1872 began working as a library clerk at the Marine Ministry, a job he found unbearably boring. Six years later, with the help of his close friend Flaubert, he managed to get transferred to the somewhat less dreary Ministry of Art and Education, a position he held until 1880. Flaubert, who read and commented on his work, introduced him to many writers, among them Zola, Turgenev, Alphonse Daudet, Edmond de Goncourt, and the young Henry James. Maupassant, in turn, helped Flaubert research the documentation for *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Like Huysmans, Maupassant was a member of the naturalist Médan group and in 1880 published "Boule de suif" in *Les Soirées de Médan*. Heralded a masterpiece by Flaubert, the story brought him instant fame. Maupassant loved boating and brothels (Flaubert repeatedly advised him to write more and fornicate less), and, despite his robust appearance and reputed sexual prowess (Goncourt, Flaubert, and Huysmans all mention an incredible incident in which they claim Maupassant had sexual intercourse, in front of them, with a Folies Bergère dancer, five times in a row), he suffered from syphilis and worried constantly about his health. He used many different drugs — ether, hashish, cocaine, and morphine — for pain relief. Anecdotes about Maupassant's bizarre behavior abound. Besides the public sexual



escapade already mentioned, he is said to have burned a manuscript of 220 pages in exchange for the favors of a young Russian woman. Another story, one that Maupassant circulated about himself, is that he had eaten human flesh, which he claimed "tasted bland and smelled like old veal." He had many mistresses, including Gisèle d'Estoc, a lesbian who occasionally dressed in men's clothing. However, with the exception of his mother, he was never seriously involved with a woman. He liked to refer to himself as a "manufacturer of letters," and, fond of making money, he published an astonishing number of stories (nearly three hundred) and succeeded in becoming quite rich. By the late 1880s he had entered the third stage of syphilis; along with headaches and visual problems, his symptoms included "autosopic" hallucinations, in which he would see himself sitting in an armchair, dictating the words he had just written. By 1891 he had bouts of paranoia and delusions of grandeur, insisting his friends address him as "Monsieur le comte." In 1892 he attempted suicide and was taken to an asylum in Passy. Maupassant died of tertiary syphilis on July 6, 1893, completely insane. He was forty-two years old. Zola, who spoke at his funeral, remarked that Maupassant had been "one of the happiest, and unhappiest, men the world has ever seen."

ABRAHAM CATULLE MENDÈS was born in Bordeaux in 1841, the son of a Jewish banker and a Catholic mother. As a boy he loved art and literature, and when he was only eighteen he moved to Paris and founded the *Revue fantaisiste*. This was the beginning of a long career as the founder and editor of literary journals, including *Parnasse contemporain* (1866), *La République des lettres* (1875), and *La Vie populaire* (1880), a career that culminated in his appointment as the official editor of *Le Mouvement poétique en France de 1867 à 1900* for the Universal Exhibition of 1900. At twenty he published his first collection of poetry, *Philoméla*, which he dedicated to Théophile Gautier. Charming and handsome — with the "face of a sensual and seductive Christ," according to Maupassant, or "the face of Christ with the clap," according to the less generous Edmond de Goncourt — he also had a reputation for being unscrupulous, vain, and self-promoting. In 1866, when he married Théophile Gautier's daughter Judith, herself a writer, Gautier bitterly objected and did not attend the wedding. Mendès was close to Villiers, who, along with Flaubert and Leconte de Lisle, was a witness at his wedding, but their friendship was strained by jealousy (the two men were frequently attracted to the same women) and by the fact that Villiers frequently borrowed money he was unable to pay back. Mendès was one of the early French supporters of Wagner and visited the composer's home with Judith Gautier and Villiers (where they also met Nietzsche). In 1886 Mendès published *Richard Wagner*, the first monograph written, in any language, about the composer. Among Mendès's mistresses was Augusta Holmes, a composer and poet, with whom he had a seventeen-year relationship and five children. In 1895 he was awarded the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur,



which was promoted to the Legion of Honor in 1900. He was killed in a bizarre train accident in 1909, ending a career that spanned five decades. For unknown reasons, he stepped out the door of a moving train. Mendès, who was one of the most famous writers of his day, has fallen into relative obscurity. He left behind a vast body of work that includes poetry, plays, novels, and criticism.

OCTAVE-MARIE-HENRI MIRBEAU was born into a middle-class family on February 16, 1848, in Trévières, Calvados. His father was an "officer of health," a term used to designate physicians who practiced medicine without a formal degree. When Octave was fifteen he was expelled from a Jesuit school and later failed his exams twice before receiving his baccalaureate in 1866. Like so many of the writers included in this volume, he began, but never completed, law school. During the Franco-Prussian War he was accused of desertion but ultimately acquitted. After the war he settled in Paris, where he wrote theater and art reviews in which he promoted the then-unknown artists Rodin, Monet, and Pissarro, as well as van Gogh (whose *Sunflowers* and *Irises* he bought for 600 francs), Gauguin, Renoir, Degas, Cézanne, and Bonnard. He was very close to Monet and Rodin, who in 1890 made the bust of Mirbeau that marks the author's grave. Mirbeau used the press as a vehicle for his monarchist, anticlerical, antimilitary, and anti-Semitic views. His extreme opinions led to frequent duels, including one with Mendès in 1884. His friends in the literary world included Mallarmé, Villiers, and Maupassant, in whose pornographic sketch *À la feuille de Rose, maison turque* (1875), which was performed before a private audience that included Flaubert, Turgenev, and Zola, Mirbeau played the role of the husband. In 1885 he published his first collection of short stories, *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, which was followed by three autobiographical novels, *Le Calvaire* (1887), *L'Abbé Jules* (1888) and *Sébastien Roch* (1890). By the mid-eighties his political sympathies had shifted, and during the nineties he actively supported the anarchists and was an outspoken Dreyfusard. When Zola was sentenced for his involvement, Mirbeau paid his fine for him and helped the author of *J'accuse* escape to England. Remarking on his political extremes, Mirbeau wrote, "I was first a revolutionary Bonapartist, then a revolutionary royalist, then just a revolutionary." In 1887 he married Alice Regnault, an ex-actress and novelist who was frequently at the center of scandals. Mirbeau's friends accused Regnault of being manipulative and cruel and blamed her for the catastrophic failure of the marriage and the writer's consequent depression. In 1899 Mirbeau published the *The Torture Garden* and the following year, *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, which caused a sensation and was an enormous success, selling more than one hundred thousand copies in its first year. Mirbeau's pen had made him a wealthy man. In addition to his dog (commemorated in the novel *Dingo*), rare flowers, and exotic birds, he loved automobiles and owned one of the first models. The title of his 1907 novel, *La 628-E-8* (1907), is taken from his car's reg-



istration number. The last years of Mirbeau's life were marked by failing health, and after moving repeatedly he settled in Paris, across the street from his physician. Mirbeau died on February 16, 1917, putting an end to his vast literary output, which included short stories, novels, plays, art criticism, and more than fourteen hundred articles.

**JEAN MORÉAS** (Johannes Papadiamantopoulos) was born into an aristocratic Greek family in Athens in 1856. He was raised with a French governess, a former actress of the Comédie Française, who taught him to speak French and introduced him to French literature. While still a child, he vowed to become "the greatest of French poets." His father sent him to Germany to study law, but he spent his time instead reading Heine, Schopenhauer, Goethe, and Nietzsche. He eventually quit school and went to Paris, where he remained for more than thirty years, returning to Athens only twice. In Paris, he adopted the name Moréas and became an active member of the Parisian literary scene by starting, promoting, and denouncing various movements. He was a member of the Zutists, the Hydropaths, and the Jemenfoutistes. He wrote the "Manifeste du Symbolisme" for the literary supplement of *Le Figaro* in 1886. He later rejected the freedom of Symbolism and was one of the founders of the Roman School, a movement that sought a return to classical forms. He often complained of tremendous boredom and would frequent five or six cafés a day, among them Balzar, Deux Magots, and Le Chat Noir. He met Oscar Wilde in the early 1880s, when the English decadent visited Paris, and the two men became friends. He collaborated on two books of prose with Paul Adam, *Le Thé chez Miranda* and *Les Demoiselles Goubert*, but is remembered largely as a poet, the author of *Les Syrtes* (1884), *Les Cantilènes* (1886), and the soberly classical *Les Stances* (1899–1901). He was known to be arrogant and vain, a dandy who would dress only in white, with the exception of his brightly colored ties. When he was fifty-three Moréas was awarded the Legion of Honor and naturalized as a French citizen. The following year, 1910, he was stricken by hemiplegia and hospitalized. He died on March 1, 1910, and, according to Gourmont, who likened the process of Moréas's death to a beautiful poem, did so with great refinement.

**JOSEPH-AIMÉ PÉLADAN**, called **JOSÉPHIN**, was born in Lyon on March 28, 1858. He liked to claim that he was a descendant of the Catholic Chevaliers de Saint-Louis, but his ancestors had in fact been Protestant peasants and traders. His father was an ultraconservative eccentric who wrote pamphlets on "authentic prophecies," including those of Nostradamus, and an advocate of homeopathic remedies, an enthusiasm he passed on to his eldest son, Adrien, who became a homeopathic doctor and died of an overdose of strychnine. Péladan moved to Paris in 1881, ready to pursue a literary career. Given his family's modest resources, he took a job as a bank clerk, and his first manuscripts were written on the back of Crédit



Français papers. The bank clerk believed himself to be an Assyrian monarch, either by birth or reincarnation, and baptized himself Sâr (which means "magician" in ancient Persian). He donned remarkably odd clothing and wore his beard in the style of an ancient Assyrian king, twisting it to form two long points. Shortly after moving to Paris he moved in with Henriette Maillat, a woman who suffered from convulsions, dementia, and hysteria. She was also connected to the literary world and introduced him to Huysmans and Barbey, whom Péladan idolized, both as a writer and dandy. His romance with Henriette came to an end when she wrote to Barbey accusing Péladan of persecuting her by means of magic. Huysmans would later accuse him of a similar crime, of using magic to murder the Abbé Boullon. Péladan saw Barbey every Sunday, and the older man's support helped him find a publisher for his first novel, *Le Vice suprême* (1884). In 1885 Péladan went to Bayreuth for a performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* and became an enthusiastic convert to Wagnerism, publishing the composer's complete works in 1895. In 1888 he was one of the founders of the modern French Order of the Rosicrucians, and two years later he formed his own Order of the Rose & Cross-Aesthetic, which blended magic, Catholicism, and art. Each month he exhibited art, held concerts (for which Erik Satie composed incidental music), gave lectures, and staged his own dramas. In 1896 he married a wealthy countess. Wagner's *Parsifal* was played during their wedding ceremony, and both the bride and groom wore black. The "Sârine," however, soon accused the Sâr of squandering her fortune and was granted a divorce in 1900. The following year Péladan married Christiane Taylor, a Protestant Englishwoman born in Brazil. His career soon faltered, and in 1908 he was among the authors whom his publisher pulped. (Alfred Jarry was another). He died of food poisoning on June 27, 1918, leaving behind an extensive body of work, including novels, art criticism, mystical texts, essays, and articles. "Péladan," Apollinaire wrote for his obituary, "will remain a unique figure, religious and magical, somewhat faded, somewhat ridiculous, but extremely appealing and infinitely refined."

RACHILDE was born Marguerite Eymery on February 11, 1860, near Périgueux. She was an only child, and her father, disappointed that she was not a boy, raised her as a son, giving her riding lessons and taking her on hunting trips. She received no formal education but was allowed free access to her grandfather's library, where she found and read Sade while still an adolescent. She began using the pseudonym Rachilde as a teenager, and when she was twenty-one she moved to Paris, where she was granted permission from the local police department to appear in public dressed as a man (under late-nineteenth-century French law, transvestism was a crime). Her visiting card read "Rachilde: Man of Letters." Her first novel, *Monsieur Vénus*, brought her instant fame and notoriety, and she was dubbed "Mademoiselle Baudelaire" by Maurice Barrès. At twenty-nine she married Alfred Vallette, and a



year later gave birth to her only child, Gabrielle, with whom she had a distant relationship. Together with her husband and Gourmont, she founded the influential *Mercur de France*. Among her friends were Gourmont, Villiers, Lorrain, Mendès (with whom she was supposedly infatuated), and Jarry, whom she supported both critically and financially, using her considerable influence to get *Ubu roi* staged. Rachilde wrote prolifically, publishing more than sixty books. Once an anarchist sympathizer, she became a conservative nationalist; in 1925 she started a brawl at La Closerie des Lilas with a group of surrealists by declaring that a French woman should never marry a German. (André Breton called her a "soldiers' whore" while Robert Desnos chanted "Long live Germany" and Philippe Soupault swung from the chandelier.) A self-professed antifeminist and misanthrope, Rachilde preferred the company of her pet rats to human beings. She remained in her apartment above the *Mercur de France* office at 26, Rue de Condé until her death at the age of ninety-three, on April 4, 1953.

JEAN-MARIE-MATHIUS-PHILIPPE-AUGUSTE, COMTE DE VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM was born on November 7, 1838, in Saint Brieuc, Brittany, the only child of an impoverished noble family. Called Mathius by his family and friends, Villiers was chosen to restore glory and prosperity to the illustrious family name by becoming a great writer. He moved to Paris at twenty, subsisting on an allowance provided by a devoted aunt, and was soon a habitu  of the caf s, where he became known for his bizarre clothing and his theatrical readings. Huysmans, who would become one of his closest friends, called him "the most astonishing talker of this age." He also formed close friendships with Mend s, Mallarm , and Gourmont. In 1867 he proposed to Th ophile Gautier's daughter Estelle. The engagement, however, was called off when Villiers's family cruelly objected on the grounds that Gautier's family was not worthy of him. This was just one of many doomed relationships the author would have with women. When his aunt died in 1871, his allowance vanished and Villiers became desperately poor. Although he published sporadically and was praised by Baudelaire, Flaubert, Hugo, and Mallarm , he was never accepted by the public and lived most of his life in abject poverty. He dreamed of marrying a rich woman and went so far as to engage a matrimonial agent, who matched him with an English heiress. After a crash course in English from Mallarm , Villiers crossed the channel to meet his future wife. The young woman, apparently frightened by his oddness, called the whole thing off. Instead, he became involved with Marie Dantine, an illiterate charwoman, who gave birth to his only child, Victor, in 1881. Unable to make a living off of his writing, he took work as a boxing partner, prompting Bloy to complain, "Comte Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, owner of one of the greatest names in Europe and one of the most shining poetic minds this century has seen, is a sparring partner in a gymnasium, and for wages of sixty francs a month receives dozens of blows in the face every



week in order to feed his child." He also worked briefly for a certain Dr. Latino, who specialized in curing insanity. Villiers's job was to sit in the waiting room and play the part of a cured madman, a living advertisement for the doctor's talents. In the late 1880s, when Villiers began to suffer from stomach cancer and his financial situation became even more desperate, Mallarmé and Huysmans set up a discreet fund to which friends (including Maupassant and Mendès) contributed five francs a month. Mallarmé passed the money on to the proud Villiers by claiming it represented royalties. When Villiers was hospitalized, Huysmans visited every day and, along with Mallarmé, managed to convince him, on his deathbed, to wed Marie Dantine, and thereby legitimize his son. On August 14, 1889, with Mallarmé and Huysmans as witnesses, the proud aristocrat, who had been groomed to restore glory on his illustrious name, married an illiterate cleaning woman. He died four days later.



# Contributors

Emily Apter is Professor of Comparative Literature and Romance Studies at Cornell University. Her books include *André Gide and the Codes of Homotextuality*, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* and *Continental Drift: From National Character to Virtual Subjects*. She co-edited *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* and is currently at work on *Spaces of Demimonde/Fin de Siècle Subcultures 1890 to 1990*.

Janet Beizer is Professor of French at the University of Virginia. She is the author of *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* and *Family Plots: Balzac's Narrative Generations*. She is currently working on a book about women's autobiographical biographies.

Charles Bernheimer was Professor of Romance Languages and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Flaubert and Kafka: Studies in Psychopoetic Structure* and *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France*, editor of *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, and co-editor of *Dora's Case: Freud-Hysteria-Feminism* and *The Queen of Decadence: Salome in Modern Culture*.

Jennifer Birkett is Professor of French Studies at the University of Birmingham. She has written *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1870–1914* and *Sexuality, Politics and Fiction in the French Revolution*, and contributed to *Fin de siècle and its Legacy*.

Peter Brooks is Tripp Professor of Humanities and Director of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University. He is the author of *The Melodramatic Imagination*, *Reading for the Plot*, *Body Work*, and *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*.

Françoise Meltzer, Professor and Chair of Comparative Literature and Professor of French and Divinity at the University of Chicago, is the author of *Salome and the Dance of Writing* and *Hot Property: The Stakes and Claims of Literary Originality*, and editor of *The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis*. She is currently at work on *Joan of Arc and the Discourse of Virginity*.



Richard Sieburth, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at New York University, is currently preparing an edition of Gérard de Nerval's selected writings for Penguin Classics.

Barbara Spackman is Associate Professor of Italian and Director of Graduate Studies at New York University. She is the author of *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* and *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy*.







**This edition designed by Bruce Mau Design Inc.  
Bruce Mau with Chris Rowat and Stefan Wolf  
Type composed by Archetype**